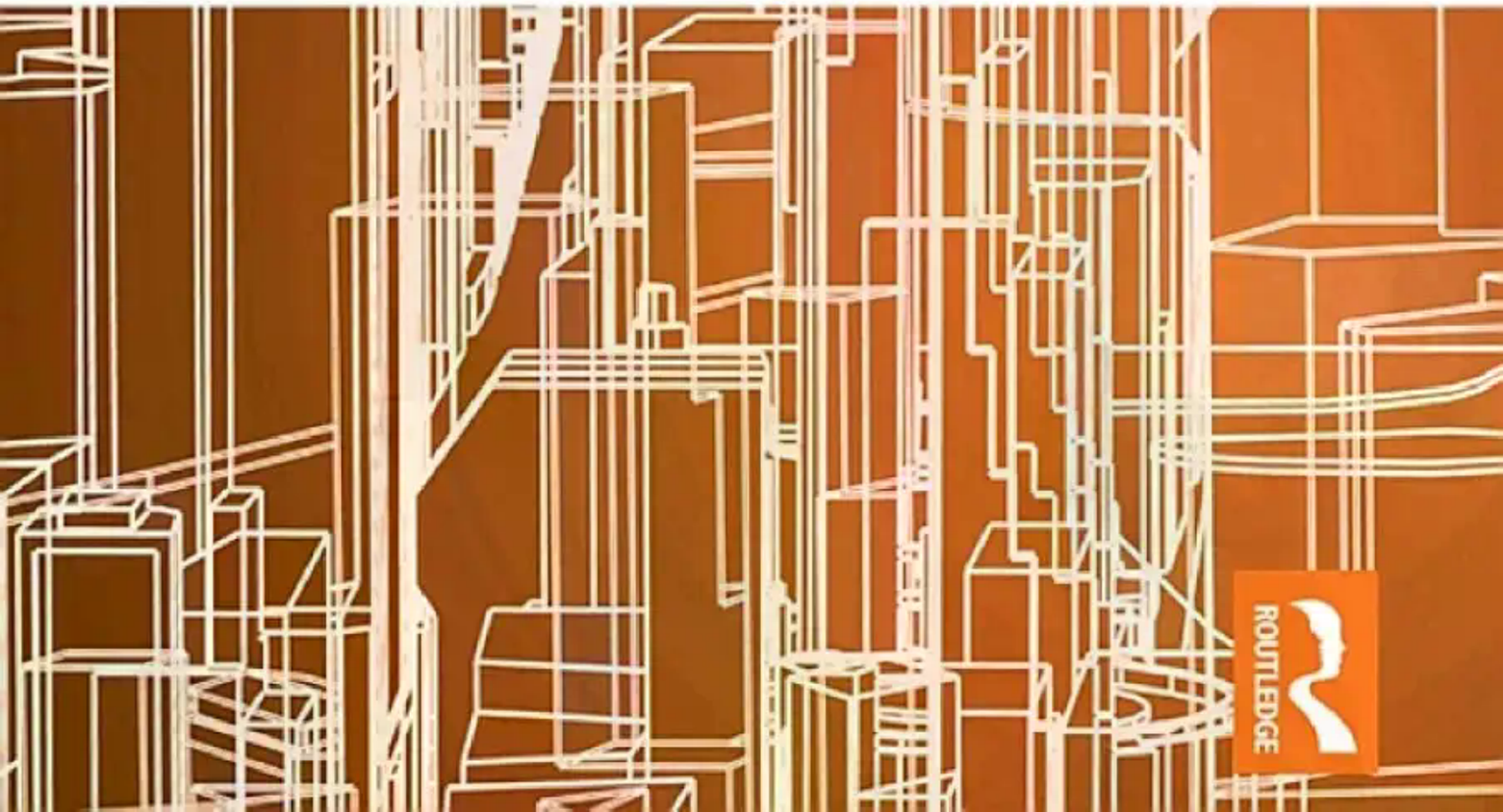
*Popular Culture and World Politics*

# THE WORLD POLITICS OF DISCO ELYSIUM

Edited by
Vic Castro and Nicholas Kiersey



# The World Politics of Disco Elysium

*The World Politics of Disco Elysium* analyzes the distinctive political claims and original arguments on a wide range of international political issues of the highly acclaimed Marxist video game *Disco Elysium* (2019), which takes place in a speculative fictional world anchored in a post-Soviet Estonian perspective.

*Disco Elysium* (2019) has been repeatedly acclaimed as one of the best video games of all time. This detective role-playing game unfolds in a city ruined by a failed communist revolution and occupied by a foreign coalition. Furthering recent work in International Relations and popular culture, this book claims that the "cognitive estrangement" of speculative fiction can produce theoretical and political novelty, beyond merely reflecting existing political dynamics. By placing a metaphor for the Estonian capital Tallinn at the center of a world, *Disco Elysium* produces an estranged Estonian perspective on world politics that challenges dominant Anglo-American views of International Relations, while also undermining the opposition between a coherent West and a colonized Rest. The contributors, from International Relations and Cultural Studies, discuss the game's claims on topics such as capitalism, (neo)liberalism, foreign intervention, law enforcement, fascism, colonialism, gender, disability, violence, memory, revolutionary politics, the European Union, political realism and international security.

*The World Politics of Disco Elysium* will be of great interest to students and scholars researching the politics of popular culture, post-Soviet politics, non-Western International Relations, as well as game studies and cultural studies.

**Vic Castro** is an independent scholar with a PhD in political science (2024) from the University of Copenhagen. Their work has been published in journals including *Security Dialogue* and *European Journal of International Security*. They are a former communications officer for the STAIR section of ISA.

**Nicholas Kiersey** is Professor of Political Science at University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. His research addresses austerity, biopolitics and the crises of the neoliberal capitalist state. He is currently working on a book about socialist governmentality and the cultural political economy of the end of capitalism.

## Popular Culture and World Politics

Edited by Matt Davies, *Newcastle University*, Kyle Grayson, *Newcastle University*, Simon Philpott, *Newcastle University*, Christina Rowley, *University of Bristol*, & Jutta Weldes, *University of Bristol*

The *Popular Culture World Politics* (PCWP) book series is the forum for leading interdisciplinary research that explores the profound and diverse interconnections between popular culture and world politics. It aims to bring further innovation, rigor and recognition to this emerging subfield of International Relations.

To these ends, the PCWP series is interested in various themes, from the juxtaposition of cultural artefacts that are increasingly global in scope and regional, local and domestic forms of production, distribution, and consumption; to the confrontations between cultural life and global political, social, and economic forces; to the new or emergent forms of politics that result from the rescaling or internationalization of popular culture.

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Narratives of World Politics
*Adam Stock*

***The World Politics of Disco Elysium***
*Edited by Vic Castro and Nicholas Kiersey*

# The World Politics of Disco Elysium

Edited by Vic Castro and Nicholas Kiersey

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***(N.K.)*** **For Eva.**

***(V.C.)*** **For my friend and colleague, Yevgeniy Golovchenko.**

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# About the editors

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**Nicholas Kiersey** is Professor of Political Science at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. His research addresses austerity, biopolitics and the crises of the neoliberal capitalist state. He is currently working on a book about socialist governmentality and the cultural political economy of the end of capitalism. He is co-editor with Adam Fishwick of *Post-Capitalist Futures: Political Economy Beyond Crisis and Hope* (Pluto Press, 2021), co-editor with Iver Neuman of *Battlestar Galactica and International Relations* (Routledge, 2013), and co-editor with Doug Stokes of *Foucault and International Relations: New Critical Directions* (Routledge, 2011). He is served recently as chair of the Science, Technology and Art in International Relations (STAIR) section of the International Studies Association (ISA). He has published in *Capital & Class, New Perspectives, New Political Science, Global Society, Global Discourse* and *Global Change, Peace & Security*.

# Contributors

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**Angel Vazquez** holds a bachelor of arts degree in political science from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, which he earned in 2023. His academic focus was on international politics and political theory. He intends to pursue graduate studies in the near future to further his research interests.

**Juha A. Vuori** is Senior Lecturer of international politics at the University of Turku in Finland. His latest book is *Chinese Macrosecuritization: China's Alignment in Global Security Discourses* (Routledge).

# Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without a series of happy accidents and a lot of hard work by a lot of people. The first accident occurred when participants in two separate conversations overheard each other talking about role-playing games (RPGs) during a coffee break at the 2019 European International Studies Association's (EISA) Exploratory Symposia Workshop in Rapallo, Italy. It was there, on a hotel terrace overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, that Nicholas Kiersey and Juha A. Vuori first began to ask the question, "Why do pop culture scholars in International Relations overlook RPGs?" It seemed further discussion was in order. And so, the two set out to convene some conference panels. The first of these took place in April 2021 during the 62nd Annual Convention of the International Studies Association (ISA), where a panel was gathered for the first time to discuss "Role-Playing Games Within Popular Culture and World Politics." The second took place in September 2021 at the EISA's 11th Pan-European Conference. Both events were held virtually that year. Kiersey decided to focus his papers for both these events on a recently released "Marxist" RPG, called *Disco Elysium*. Featuring voice acting contributions from well-known online figures on the socialist left at that time, including hosts of "dirtbag left" podcasts like Chapo Trap house and Red Scare, the game was gaining underground popularity at the time. But in December 2019, news broke that it had won the "Best Independent Game" award at the year's prestigious Game Awards in Los Angeles. And here the second accident took place. In March 2021, Kiersey was Chair of ISA's Science, Technology and Art (STAIR) section and Vic Castro had just accepted the position as STAIR's Communications Officer. Castro had the game somewhere in their stack of unplayed Steam titles, and so, after Kiersey's presentation at the 2021 ISA (and after finally playing the game), they reached out to him to suggest that "the politics of *Disco Elysium* could fill an edited volume." The next step was a STAIR-sponsored panel focused completely on the game at the 2022 ISA Annual Convention in Nashville. Titled "The Politics of *Disco Elysium*: Estonian Tales of Marxist Detectives and Foreign Occupation," the panel brought together for the first time several of the contributors featured in the present volume: namely James Gilley, Umut Mert Gürses, Teemu T. Rantanen, Chris Rossdale and Juha A. Vuori. An online workshop dedicated to the volume followed in June 2022, which incorporated early iterations of the projects in this volume by Vic Castro, Felix Ciută, Arthur Duhé, Bart Gabriel, Pekka M. Kolehmainen and Guillaume Lacombe-Kishibe. *Disco Elysium* was discussed again at a "Role-Playing Games and World

Politics" panel organized by Vuori and Saara Särmä at the 9th European Workshops in International Studies (EWIS), July 2022, in Thessaloniki. Most recently, Kiersey gave a presentation on the book project as a whole at the 15th Popular Culture and World Politics Conference (PCWP), November 2024, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

## Section one

# An introduction to *Disco Elysium*

# 1 Introduction to *The World Politics of* Disco Elysium

*Nicholas Kiersey and Vic Castro*

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## Introduction

This book analyzes the political claims of the acclaimed Marxist role-playing game (RPG) *Disco Elysium* (2019) from Estonian art collective and game studio ZA/UM. Despite its arguably niche political leanings, the game has been praised repeatedly as one of the best video games of all time.[1] While essentially a hardboiled detective noir murder mystery, the game borrows heavily from the "stoner" psychedelic fringe of the genre exemplified by Paul Thomas Anderson's *Inherent Vice* (2014), Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly* (2006) and the Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski* (1998). As the game begins, the player finds themself in control of Harry Du Bois, an amnesiac and drug-addled police detective. A body is discovered hanging from a tree behind a hostel in Martinaise, a poverty-stricken dockyard district of a fictional metropolis. The player's main task is to figure out the murderer's identity. But first, Harry must remember his own identity and learn to navigate the complex politics of the neighborhood's labor disputes.

The present volume analyzes *Disco Elysium*'s speculative fictional world as a political text that provides original arguments on a wide range of issues within world politics. Building on insights from Science Fiction Studies, the volume follows Darko Suvin's (1979) claim that the "cognitive estrangement" of speculative fiction can circulate and produce theoretical and political novelty, beyond merely reflecting existing political dynamics. In International Relations (IR), within the subfield of Popular Culture and World Politics (PCWP), scholars have focused on the complex "circulation" (Kiersey and Neumann 2013) of ideas between first- and second-order representations of world politics. Revachol, the second-order speculative fictional city at the heart of the game, is a cultural object rife with tensions echoing the predicaments of our own world politics. In the chapters that follow, we present a series of case studies examining the major cognate political themes of the game, including the dynamics of post-soviet Eastern European civil society, the question of post-capitalist transition and the political potential of

transgressive aesthetics. In these areas and more, as we develop later, the game strives to intervene and disrupt expectations, making them strange and opening new interpretive possibilities for what is often taken for granted in traditional understandings of world politics.

Published in October 2019, *Disco Elysium* is already old by the standards of the gaming world. Yet it continues to be taken up by online communities as inspiration for countless memes, works of fan fiction and theoretical debate. Admittedly, the game is self-consciously political, with dialogue reflecting socialist and communist sensibilities that have been expressed within Leftist spaces since at least the time of the anti-globalization protests of the late 1990s. Thus, for example, we can encounter dialogue within the game that echoes anti-capitalist preoccupations with so-called neoliberal "disaster" capitalism (Klein 2008) and faith in the potential of an alliance of minoritarian human and nonhuman forces to lead a radically democratic post-capitalist transition (Hardt and Negri 2005). Yet the game also offers a political critique that appears quite consciously to invoke the lived experiences of a newer generation of leftists: the "Millennial Left" (Hochuli 2024). This political cohort came of age during the 1990s and constituted a core pillar of the global activist wave subsequently associated with left populist electoral campaigns such as those of Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn or Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

The millennial sensibilities of the game are attested by the seemingly intentional way the plot draws on Mark Fisher's theory of *Capitalist Realism* (Fisher 2009). As Gürses details in his contribution to this book, Fisher's influence can be observed in the game's portrayal of the interdependency between everyday material precarity and mental health, a theme discussed frequently by young political subjects in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. This dynamic relationship between late capitalism and mental health is represented in the textual plot of Harry Du Bois's psychological deterioration, but also, as discussed in Lacombe-Kishibe's chapter, in the therapeutic elements of the computer game's very procedurality. Yet, as we will see, mental health issues constitute just one facet of the complex cognitive dialogue between the second-order world of *Disco Elysium* and our own world, with the game delving also into questions such as imperialism, political subjectivity and agency in a crumbling present.

In the next section, we outline the game's basic world-building and note some of the many ways it models, albeit perhaps in an estranged fashion, recognizable and cognitively coherent political problems that have allowed the game to connect with young critically minded audiences. We argue that while *Disco Elysium* contains many self-evidently absurd and fantastical elements—suggesting thusly that the ability of the game's setting to stand in for our own "real world" ought not to be exaggerated—the game still shares a productive cognitive overlap with our own world-political situation, de-essentializing it in intellectually productive ways. In Section Three, we address the status of this volume as a contribution to the study of games within PCWP. We outline what it means for us to apply a Critical IR theory perspective to the task of studying a world-political artifact like *Disco Elysium* through the

conceptual prisms of coloniality, the end of capitalism and nonhuman agency. In doing so, we crucially give attention to several of the non-textual "procedural" elements of the game. Finally, Section Four gives an overview of the chapters that follow.

## 1.1 The world politics of *Disco Elysium*

*Disco Elysium*'s main plot is based on the seemingly simple formula of the noir detective story. The policeman protagonist, Lieutenant Harry Du Bois, wakes up amnesiac in a thrashed hostel room after a frenzied bout of alcohol consumption. He must solve the murder of a man found hanged in a tree behind the hostel. The game is faithful to the genre: a male alcoholic hero haunted by a romantic breakup; a rule-abiding police partner, here Kim Kitsuragi, trying to keep the hero on his tracks; a body and a crime scene; clues to be found; suspects to be interrogated; and a long series of false leads and red herrings.

The game takes place in the desolate neighborhood of Martinaise within the metropolis of Revachol, on the isola—a pocket of ocean and landmass surrounded by the mysterious Pale—of Insulinde. Much of the cityscape lies in ruins, littered with abandoned vehicles and bombed-out buildings, a testament to a failed communist revolution and decades of subsequent occupation by a rapacious multinational coalition. During the Antecentennial Revolution of 1902, roughly half a century before the events of the game, a communist uprising began on the neighboring isola of Graad. "Communards" successfully campaigned against Revachol's monarchical regime and founded the Commune of Revachol. The Commune was administered by "le Parti communiste d'Insulinde" until 1908, when the liberal Moralintern Coalition launched an invasion to restore order. The Insulindian Citizens Militia (ICM) finally succumbed to the Coalition's superior military and airpower in 1910, and the commune surrendered. Around 40 million people died in the revolution and the war, including nearly all the revolutionaries. Numerous heavily armed Coalition airships remain in place over Revachol at the time of the game's events, ready to intervene at a moment's notice to restore order should the conflict resume. Clearly, even some forty years after the end of the revolution, the transitional authority's grip on power remains tenuous, and the Moralintern remains nervous about the political climate in the city.

The idea of a multinational coalition occupying what is effectively a subaltern city will not be strange for IR scholars. Many will also easily be able to imagine the existence of a local, volunteer-based interim police authority, the Coalition's "Revachol Citizens' Militia" (RCM). Elements of the RCM predate the Coalition, and it is said that the force is modeled on the old communard brigades themselves. The force is poorly equipped, corrupt and generally ineffective. Most serious crimes in the city go unresolved, and jurisdictional turf wars between the different precincts are commonplace. Unsurprisingly, the RCM has an especially difficult time operating in the district of Martinaise, where the dockworkers' powerful "Débardeurs' Union," led by the corrupt Evrart Claire, has effectively established

itself as a parallel form of government over the district. The nominally social-democratic union enforces its rule through a private militia, the Hardie Boys, which refuses to recognize the Coalition's authority. We learn early in the game that the Débardeurs are picketing the giant shipping conglomerate Wild Pines, demanding "every worker a member of the board." The company employs the private mercenary group Krenel, another key military force in the game, to crack down on the strike.

A distinctive aspect of *Disco Elysium*'s world-building is a supernatural force called the Pale. The Pale is a form of psychic anti-matter that surrounds the various islands and continents of *Disco Elysium*, making up 72% of the world's surface and inexorably expanding. The Pale is a force that stops all progress, both physically and conceptually. While it appears to humans as a thick mist or fog, it contains nothing. It renders entire concepts like math, language and knowledge meaningless. We learn that it is composed of "past information, that's degrading," and that it suspends "the laws of physics, but also the laws of psychology, maybe History." "Interisolary" travel through the Pale is possible, but risky, as overexposure leads to cognitive damage and psychological unraveling. Scrambling the past and making it hard for people to imagine a future, the Pale seems to represent the loss of the very possibility of the new, as it threatens to slowly engulf the world.

The murderer, as finally revealed, is a jaded old ICM political commissar who lives secluded on an island and believes the revolution is still taking place. Yet the largest revelation in the endgame may be the subsequent encounter with the Insulindian Phasmid, a "cryptid" or supernatural animal. The cryptozoologist couple Lena and Morell had been trying to find the Phasmid but ultimately gave up hope, succumbing to the belief that such fantastical things cannot possibly exist. Symbolically, the Phasmid appears as an antithesis to the Pale, representing the idea that new, unimaginable things are still possible in the world. In this sense, the political upshot of the game may simply be the urgency of the struggle to maintain space for the new. The game recognizes the historic failure of Marxist revolution, the terrible allure of fascism, and the complacency of liberalism—yet hope for a better future can bring new possibilities as long as people are willing to keep trying.

Now available in twelve languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Turkish and Arabic, the game has amassed an energetic and diverse community of fans with around 121,000 members on the Reddit page and another 15,000 in the Discord channel. *Disco Elysium* may not have a massive following compared to large-studio AAA computer games, and fewer real-world "intertexts" can be pointed to compared to some popular TV franchises (see Kiersey and Neumann 2013). Moreover, given its relatively niche nature as a "Marxist" video game that nevertheless criticizes the historical legacy of communism, it was perhaps inevitable that its fandom would be fairly specialist in nature. Yet it is also clear that the game's producers sought consciously to market the game to young Millennial Left consumers. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in their decision to employ the hosts of famous Millennial Left podcasts such as *Chapo Trap House* and *Red Scare* as voice actors for several of the game's characters. These figures were globally well

known at the time as founders of the "dirtbag left" (see Frost 2023) subgroup of activists associated with the Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn movements. Known to be extremely active in online communities, their involvement gave the game a certain cachet. A conspicuously named "Working Class Update" was released for free in 2020, purportedly optimized so the game would run on older and lower-end computers. This was followed in 2022 by a free "Final Cut" update of the game, featuring extended and rerecorded dialogue using new voice actors.

As Stuart Hall (2007) noted long ago, audience groups can take interest in a diverse range of ongoing social phenomena that they understand to be shaping their lives. In this sense, the critical study of popular culture is not just about artefacts, narratives and products. As Grayson suggests, it is also about socially dominant sets of expectations and demands or, that is, "the forms of sensibility through which these artefacts are produced, circulated, and interpreted" (2013, p. viii). Crucially then, in order for their work to be able to connect with an audience, authors must shape and channel their creative endeavors to satisfy these sensibilities. Yet, when it comes to computer games and their online fan communities, the increasing capacity for creative technical virtuosity among online audiences complicates this author-audience dynamic. Focusing on the case of militarized gaming content, for example, Robinson (2012) concludes that "critical" games and community-produced "mods" can serve as sites for forms of protest which, while as yet perhaps a marginal presence, indicate the potential for agency within gaming communities.

Like Robinson, we believe that the reception of computer games by fan communities points to the importance of studying an artifact's reciprocal and co-constitutive relationship with its audience. Indeed, this point seems especially important when it comes to discussing the world politics of *Disco Elysium*. As discussed by Gabriel in this volume, the study of online communities dedicated to *Disco Elysium* reveals fans from around the world producing an ever-proliferating series of discussions about the game. Numerous blog essays on the political theories embodied in the game can be found online (see, for example, Price 2022; DuBois 2020). There have also been countless "video essays" posted on YouTube by fans and game critics—some with viewership in the hundreds of thousands, like Epoch Philosophy's *The Philosophy of Disco Elysium: Psychoanalysis, Ideology and Absurd Modernism* (https://youtu.be/n84A3ykGya0?si=_OVvFx5-F-jXoomR).

The fan community has also recently released two translations of the 2013 Robert Kurvitz novel, *Sacred and Terrible Air*, the literary artefact which first described the world in which *Disco Elysium* is set (Ostler 2023). The version posted by the group tequilla_sunset5 includes a glossary and original artwork and shows 50,000 downloads on goofily.io, while the version posted by Group Ibex is said to be translated in a way more aligned with the terminology used in the game. Moreover, the realm of fandom is not limited to online communities as two large *Disco Elysium*-themed Live Action Role Play (LARP) games took place in 2024 in Terezín, in the Czech Republic (https://revachol.rolling.cz). Finally, academic scholarship on the game has been produced in the form of a 2021 special issue of the *Baltic Screen Media Review*. It featured articles on topics such as the production of game-making

communities in Estonia (Ozimek 2021), Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's concept of a "game of the multitude" (Gekker and Joseph 2021), and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome (Belmonte 2021). In these respects, *Disco Elysium* has solicited a global fabric of complex and creative estrangement effects, a testament to the profound and ever-shifting nature of the artifact's content and meaning.

## 1.2 Studying computer games in PCWP

*Disco Elysium* offers a dense and cognitively commensurable account of the political world in which it is set. Yet why should any of this matter specifically for the study of IR? There are by now numerous monographs and edited volumes on the "intertext" of popular culture and world politics. This volume is part of a series dedicated to that very subject, as the reader is likely already aware. So far, however, PCWP has focused little attention on computer games or the worlds in which they take place. Where video games have come up for discussion in IR, the focus has tended to be on how the technologies that build virtual worlds represent and amplify our own world back to us (Deibert 1997; Brennan 2015). Power (2007), for example, argues that dominant institutions like the U.S. Army develop game worlds where players are led to "enjoy" war and accept the moral perspective of Western forces. Hayden (2016) extends this kind of analysis from the narrative realm toward gameplay procedure, looking at choice creation as a form of world-political simulation. Conversely, Der Derian (2000) argues that game-like technologies are altering the experience of soldiering itself, notably in the case of drone warfare (cf. Grayson 2014).

Our approach in this volume is not a simple "add IR and stir." Heeding the criticism by IR scholars like Carpenter (2016) and Lawson (2011), we do not seek to perform mere discourse analysis on cultural artifacts. To the contrary, we argue that IR's engagement with speculative fiction is at its best when it is challenging the discipline's shallow worldview, pointing it toward new and emancipatory ways of imagining the world. We do agree with the claims of more culturally determinist approaches in IR (see Shapiro 2004, 2012; Weber 2009) that the unconscious ideologies of fictional universes must be grasped as part of a wider plane of constitutive, textual pillars of the real. But we hope not to lose sight of how cultural artifacts can also be transgressive—that is, how they can put an end to *sameness* and challenge aspects of the social world that we might otherwise take for granted. In this light, a goal of the book is to operationalize in a political context the concept of "cognitive estrangement," coined by Darko Suvin (1979), as a prime characteristic of science-fiction literature. Estrangement puts familiar political matters in settings that are technologically, socially or culturally unfamiliar, thus permitting the exploration of political possibilities. In this section, we thus ask what it might mean to apply a Critical IR theory perspective to the task of studying a critical world-political artifact like *Disco Elysium*. Following Ciută (2016), we argue that game worlds are "practical-theoretical spaces" with the potential to refigure world politics. We identify three main areas where the study of games, and the study of

*Disco Elysium* in particular, can help bring such potentials into focus. These are, namely: avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism and parochialism in postcolonial theory; embracing fantasy and enchantment as a way of restoring faith in the possibility of an alternative to capitalism; and disrupting the narrow instrumentalism of liberal modernist attitudes toward the nonhuman.

As our first contribution, we seek to craft an IR perspective on postcolonial work in the fields of literary studies and game studies. These disciplines have a thorough grasp of how game narratives and gameplay grammars can shape subjectivity and latitudes of action across a range of domains, including our sense of space and spatiality (see Bogost 2007, 2006). Examples of such work include Höglund (2008), which examines how design choices in computer games like *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* can reinforce Orientalist perspectives, and Reichmuth and Werning (2006), which looks at games like *Prince of Persia* and *Full Spectrum Warrior* to assess how visual topography, plot and gameplay elements can dispose players to Western geographical imaginaries.

While these works form a crucial background for the present volume, we are also informed by the field of non-Western IR. Attempts at escaping Western legacies in IR theorizing often end up producing "parochial theories" that indirectly serve the interests of a given non-Western state or imitating dominant Western IR regardless (Aydınlı and Biltekin 2018; Shahi 2019). Furthermore, postcolonial studies, as historically developed by figures like Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak or Edward Said, have centered upon countries nowadays placed in the "Global South," which underwent formal colonization by European powers. However, attention has recently begun to focus on other parts of the world, such as Eastern Europe, which were annexed or superseded by Russia and the USSR and which also occupy a subaltern position compared to Western Europe (Kelertas 2006; Kołodziejczyk and Şandru 2016). Postcolonial perspectives on Eastern Europe challenge the very idea of "Eurocentricism" and of a binary between the "West" and the "non-Western" by showing how colonization and colonial dynamics can occur between majority-white European countries.

The city of Revachol is an intentionally coded metaphor for the Estonian capital Tallinn. Its name, while perhaps more explicitly a reference to the French anarchist François Claudius Koenigstein (1859–1892), known also as Revachol, also echoes "Reval," the official name of Tallinn until the early 20th century. Like its real-world counterpart, the urban landscape of Revachol reveals the influence of Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and Classical European architectural styles. Revachol is located on an island roughly shaped like Estonia, and like Tallinn, it is located on the north coast of the territory. Its climate is similar, still freezing in March. Revachol also faces a short expanse of sea to the culturally related and richer country of Ozonne, much as Tallinn faces Finland. However, despite these similarities, Revachol remains a paradox, recognizable yet completely implausible. On the one hand, the "Tallinn" of *Disco Elysium* was once "the capital of the world," the center of a hegemonic imperial power with overseas colonies. This in-game Tallinn is estranged by placing its agency at the center of world history, with

historical narratives evoking settler colonialism in the Americas and imperial exploitation of Africa and Asia. On the other hand, Revachol today is a postcolonial city under international mandate in the estranged situation of an old colonizer that has become practically colonized (Barkawi 2016). *Disco Elysium*'s politics thus have no clear "domestic" component and occur necessarily in the tension between the local and the international.

For scholars of PCWP, the placing of this strange Tallinn at the center of the game's world is a provocation, forcing us to analogize what we might call an estranged "globo-Estonian" perspective on world politics. Like most video games produced outside of East Asia, *Disco Elysium* targets a white male English-speaking market demographic, proposing a world that at first glance conforms to Anglo-American cultural expectations. For us, however, the game's narrative is remarkable for the priority of place that it gives to Estonia, a minor nation compared to many of the historically great European powers. By posing a postcolonial Estonia at the center of its world, the game provokes a degree of critical reflection on the need for anti-essentialism in the field of non-Western IR. On the one hand, crucially, it functions to disrupt dominant Anglo-American views on where power lies in IR. On the other hand, however, it also serves to undermine the kinds of romantic oppositions of "coherent West and colonized Rest" in which subaltern perspectives can sometimes traffic. Admittedly, the game remains rooted in Estonia's ambiguous position as an undeniably European majority-white, culturally Christian country, with the vast majority of its history spent subjugated under various empires and now being integrated into an unevenly distributed Late Capitalist globalization. Yet by deploying a defamiliarized, anti-essentialist confrontation between local Estonian outlooks and dominant Western worldviews, Revachol's history wards off parochially or chauvinistically reductionist post-colonial perspectives.

The second contribution concerns how narratives of enchantment can help restore faith in the possibility of an alternative to the capitalist model of development. As scholars have noted, computer games can help appraise and challenge our entanglement in capitalist "Playstation" imaginaries (Bown 2018). The world-building in *Disco Elysium* suggests that it wants to be taken seriously as a Marxist critique of the logic of capital. Within the game, Mazovian Socio-Economics is an unambiguous analog for Marxist political economy, originating in the philosophy of what the game refers to explicitly as "historical materialism." As we play, Mazovian student reading groups offer detailed critical analysis of capitalist commodity fetishism and a rejection of neoliberal "common sense." However, in a stark deviation from the classic Marxist schematic, the game presents a compressed history of the transition from feudalism to early capitalism and again to neoliberalism. Indeed, the transition between the stages of political economy appears to have happened so quickly that the world's inhabitants are barely able to keep up. Characters dress in attire reminiscent of the 19th century, with street urchins and lumpen shack-dwelling figures depicted in palpably Dickensian rags. Meanwhile, the docklands feature a multitude of shipping containers, all visually

similar to the standardized shipping format of our own globalized economy (see Khalili 2020).

From a classical Marxist perspective, the juxtaposition of these recognizable elements of contemporary globalized commerce with images of 19th-century capitalist poverty might invite a certain optimism that the capitalism of Revachol is proceeding quickly to its end. Yet here, in a break with the optimism of the Marxist reading of history, no grand victory of the proletariat is anticipated. To the contrary, within the plot of *Disco Elysium*, such views are seen as economistic and part of the problem. As Wild Pines board member Joyce Messier notes, "capital has the ability to subsume all critiques into itself. Even those who would critique capital end up reinforcing it instead." The problem is that we cannot confidently imagine an alternative to capitalism; thus, the end of capitalism is likely to drag on interminably. In Joyce's words, the ending of capitalism "won't *free* anyone. It will only lead to more suffering." The game here appears to be drawing on the work of Mark Fisher (2009) and his concept of capitalist realism. Where the triumph of the neoliberal political economy in the 1980s was celebrated by some as "the end of history" (Fukuyama 1992), Fisher saw its political ramifications as particularly grave due to its corrosive effect on our psychological well-being. For the victory of neoliberalism was one not just of an ideological nature; in destroying the very human capacity to even imagine the new, neoliberalism had entrapped the human race in a battle with a condition he referred to as "hedonic depression."

In *Disco Elysium*, the death of the new is represented by the Pale, the fog that separates the various isolas (landmasses) from each other and which corrodes the subjectivity of those who come in contact with it. However, many denizens of Martinaise believe an event known as "the Return" is going to happen soon. Not only will this event reestablish communistic self-government in the city, but it will inaugurate a new era of artistic expression and enlightenment. As Kiersey and Vazquez elaborate in this volume, nobody knows exactly what this event will entail or how it will happen. But dialogue in the game hints strongly that the capacity of humans to come together and share in the transformative joy of their togetherness—whether in the shared ecstasy of certain kinds of religious worship or on the dancefloor—is the only thing that can truly keep the Pale at bay. While it might seem fantastical to think that a rave could bring about communism, we align with the scholar and science fiction author China Miéville, who argues that "fantasy is a mode that, in constructing an internally coherent but actually impossible totality—constructed on the basis that the impossible is, for this work, *true*—mimics the absurdity of capitalist modernity" (2002, 42). Given that capitalist absurdity is a major plot point in *Disco Elysium*, we think the disruptive potential of its more fantastical elements is worth exploring.

A third contribution of this volume is to expand on the challenge to liberal humanism that emerges from the procedural elements of the game. Reviewers have praised *Disco Elysium* for its explicit callbacks to the "age-old mechanics of tabletop RPGs like Dungeons & Dragons" (IGN 2019). Such games are known for their procedurally "open" style of play, where outcomes from the player's encounters

with various non-player characters are subject to influence both of both random dice rolls and of modifiers from various tools and items of clothing that can be acquired in the game. In *Disco Elysium*, adherence to this procedural formula is evidenced by its incorporation of dice rolls and consumables—such as drugs or magnesium supplements—that can amplify or diminish the player's abilities. Moreover, it is commonplace for objects and nonhuman entities to exert agency, and some are explicitly endowed with subjectivity. The Horrific Necktie, for example, can have conversations with the player, encouraging them to engage in various forms of socially deviant behavior. Elsewhere, the Phasmid informs us that "there is an almost unanimous agreement between the birds and the plants" that human beings are eventually going to destroy the whole planet.

This idea of a network of nonhuman agency points to what Kłosiński (2021) refers to as *Disco Elysium*'s "object-oriented ontology," disrupting the modern expectation that material things in the state of nature are passive, awaiting the intervention of a superior, sovereign human will. As a text-gameplay totality, *Disco Elysium* thus has affinities with new materialist, posthumanist or actor-network approaches (Barad 2003; Braidotti 2013; Latour 1993) that have become increasingly popular in the social sciences and humanities over the past decades. Yet it is the gameplay perhaps more than the text that highlights the importance of object-oriented ontology for PCWP, showing how nonhuman agency can shape and limit the (human) player's ability to act in the game.

Procedural elements are also crucial to establishing the game's fractured understanding of the self. As Lacombe-Kishibe details in his chapter, the game posits twenty-four separate cognitive "Skills" in the protagonist's psyche, each with different capacities and agendas. The player accumulates additional skill points as they complete various activities within the game. These can then be invested in skill development. The player might spend skill points on their "Inland Empire" skill, for example, in order to be able to communicate more effectively with the Horrific Necktie, gaining supernatural insights at the risk of unraveling into madness. Alternatively, they may boost the "Visual Calculus" skill to create an abstract mental recreation of the ballistics of a crime scene. Skills can be boosted or diminished in whimsical yet important ways by items of clothing, such as wearing a certain pair of sunglasses or sporting a tropical shirt. Interestingly, for a contemporary computer game, violence is conspicuously absent in the gameplay. While the plot contains plenty of allusions to violence, the myriad of skills available to the player tend to channel the game toward procedural alternatives.

Meanwhile, as Gürses develops in his chapter, the Thought Cabinet allows Harry to ruminate on particular topics or theories and develop certain affects or dispositions as the game progresses. There are unpredictable benefits and downsides to be gleaned from them. Learning the "Wompty-Dompty Dom Center" thought, for example, will help yield more experience from activities but will also reduce the "Suggestion" Skill, on account of Harry having become rather pretentious. Conversely, "Mazovian Socio-Economics" diminishes the "Visual Calculus" Skill while researching it, but once completed grants bonus experience

points anytime the player chooses communist dialogue lines. Even if Thoughts and Skills are perfectly aligned for a given dice check, successful dice rolls are by no means guaranteed, as rolling a double "one" always results in a critical failure. Nevertheless, the game gives agency not only to strange and unusual objects but also to eccentric elements of the self which can and do advance the plot in potentially unexpected or improbable ways.

In summary, the implausible recognizability of Revachol helps constitute the three core assumptions of our volume. The cognitively estranged Tallinn of *Disco Elysium* can not only help us distill and discuss certain universalities of our own Late Capitalist global condition but can do so in a way that a story set in our own Tallinn could not so easily accomplish—at least, not without becoming entangled in the stakes of the parochial political struggles and concerns. While nowhere in the book do we seek to analyze the "real" Estonia through the game or claim that an estranged Estonia such as the one presented in *Disco Elysium* can stand for "Estonia" proper, we believe the game can nevertheless still share a productive cognitive overlap with our own world. Our objective, simply put, is to take up the cognitively estranged Estonia of the game as a non-Anglo-American, unambiguously Late Capitalist, and ontologically flattened space—and thusly, in these three senses, as a situated vantage point (see Haraway 1988) from which we might address and critique our own world. Following previous works in the PCWP tradition, the chapters of this volume all seek to leverage this situated perspectival basis for contrasting and comparing questions of IR theory and world politics against the grain.

Before moving on, we want to draw attention to the question of citations in the following chapters. While this volume adheres to all standard conventions for academic writing, the lack of page numbers or time stamps within the game means it is not possible to give citations for quoted dialogue. With this in mind, we would draw the reader's attention to the existence of online dialogue databases for the game, like http://fayde.co.uk/ and https://disco-reader.gitlab.io/disco-reader/#/. These not only allow users to search for quotes but also permit cross-referenced searching of instances of terms in the game.

## 1.3 Outline of contributions

In the previous section, we noted three productive homologies between the fictional world of *Disco Elysium* and the dynamics of our own world politics. We argued that the game's critical interventions serve to disrupt subconscious ideological expectations that feed, for example, essentialism in non-Western theorizing, while simultaneously acknowledging nonhuman forms of agency and helping us imagine ways we can regenerate our faith in the possibility of transformative politics. The chapters in this book all pursue this line of thinking even further, focusing on specific structures of thought that the game brings into relief. For ease of explication, we have organized the essays into four thematic sections.

Section One includes the introduction you are reading right now. The goal of this section is to establish the significance of the game from a PCWP perspective. Next, Gabriel's chapter examines the reception of the game within its world-spanning online fan communities. As Gabriel notes, *Disco Elysium* is remarkable for having attracted such a vibrant online community despite the relative absence of support from the game's developers. Building on and referring to recent publications that have analyzed the game's primary themes as well as its relation to wider dynamics in the video game industry, Gabriel conducts a web-scraping-based text analysis of r/DiscoElysium, the game's primary community on reddit.com. The analysis reveals that *Disco Elysium*'s community discourse centers around discussion of the game's most overt political themes, its ideologies and the in-game Vision Quests attached to them. The game's treatment of marginality arguably also resonates with its community, as vitriolic content is minimally present and most polarizing terms are neutrally evaluated. Gabriel finds that players who participate in these communities are generally espousing values like tolerance and cordiality.

Section Two turns to the question of the game's setting in a Late Capitalist world, focusing primarily on questions of memory, subjectivity and socialist strategy. Duhé's chapter opens this section with a discussion of individual and collective traumatic memory as facets of how contemporary neoliberalism and financial colonialism operate. Like the protagonist detective, the district of Martinaise suffers from a traumatic memory, the details of which it cannot quite remember—but neither can it forget. For Duhé, a key source of the district's trauma is the brute historical fact of the revolution's failure. The game explores the trauma of this messy memory through the imagery of the hole: on the one hand, amnesiac characters complain about brain holes that incapacitate them; on the other, the bullet holes in the walls of Martinaise are "traces" of the violent past in Ricoeur's sense. Yet the traumatic memory of the Antecentennial Revolution in Martinaise cannot be explained entirely by the fact of its brutal defeat. Rather, argues Duhé, the decades of financial colonization which followed have led to a situation of anomie. No official memory or narrative has been established to unify the inhabitants of Martinaise and the district is haunted by capitalism's endless "digestion" of the trauma of a past that does not pass.

In Chapter 4, Gürses draws on the work of Mark Fisher in order to grasp something of the nature of late capitalist subsumption. As Gürses notes, for Fisher the secret of contemporary capitalism's longevity lies in its realism and the collective "hedonic depression" experienced by mankind when it realizes that there is no alternative. In this respect, *Disco Elysium*'s unique "Thought Cabinet" mechanism marks a helpful transformation of the inventory management systems common in contemporary video games beyond the capitalist realist understanding of exchange. By collecting thoughts and internalizing them, the player shapes the very subjectivity of their in-game character. Moreover, the collecting and allocating process of the Thought Cabinet emphasizes the *interconnectedness* of the characters in the game world. Consequently, in a break with the approach in conventional gaming, *Disco Elysium* turns inventory management into a kind of play in and of

itself. For Gürses, this turn to play and collectivity presents a challenge to the limited perception of resource management under capitalist realism. The inventory management system in the Thought Cabinet brings imagination back to the terrain of everyday cultural-political struggle. Here, each thought presents a possibility of an alternative as the player navigates around the game world, and the murder mystery becomes a surface for understanding the world rather than a simple task to be solved.

Kiersey and Vazquez, for their part, also draw on Fisher, but this time in order to examine the game as reflecting the political fatalism of what Cutrone (2023) terms "the Millennial Left." Revachol, they contend, is a manifestation of the very "end of the world" that Mark Fisher (2009) claimed was "easier to imagine today than the end of capitalism." One of the great symptoms of Fisher's fatalism, they suggest, was his embrace of disco and "acid communism" as countercultural strategies for overcoming late-stage capitalism. In a similar fashion, and here also echoing the politics of transgressive dandyism proposed by Foucault (1984), the game portrays Harry as a disco dandy and advocates for a politics of restoring countercultural vitality via disco communism. Problematically, as Kiersey and Vazquez note, in its embrace of these forms of transgressive aesthetics, *Disco Elysium* turns its back on the historical specificity of the proletariat as the universal subject of modern human liberation imagined by Marxism. However, as the authors conclude, it is a mistake to focus too much on the performative openness of the game. For other plot elements suggest that capitalism remains most fundamentally a problem of political economy. In this respect, the game returns our attention to the fundamental Marxist hypothesis that capitalism must not be so much culturally defeated as politically transcended.

Section Three is titled "World Order, Liberalism, and Security in *Disco Elysium*." The chapters in this section examine the game's portrayal of liberal interventionism from precisely the kind of situated perspective outlined earlier. In the chapters by Gilley and Rantanen, for example, it matters that the game was developed in Estonia, as there are clear homologies between the game's world and the post-Soviet Estonian experience. Yet the game makes these homologies complex. As Gilley notes, for example, one of the most intriguing elements of *Disco Elysium* can be found in the interplay between the commune of Revachol and the intervention of the market-oriented Coalition. Reviewing the state of contemporary theoretical discourse around sovereignty, Gilley notes how the location of sovereignty today is contested. With outside intervention portrayed on diverse levels within the game, however, from that of the state to that of the individual, this contestation is itself estranged within the game. Admittedly, as Gilley notes, the dominant ideologies of the Moralintern are control and centralism, which render sovereignty essentially meaningless within the domain of its power. Crucially, however, the sanity-rattling nature of the Pale is a further complicating factor when comparing the political dynamics of the game world to that of our own, as it imposes significant additional costs on any intervention. Thus, in contrast with our own world, while sovereignty

itself might be a complete fiction in *Disco Elysium*, borders have a profound ontological significance.

In Chapter 7, Rantanen examines Revachol's encounter with the Moralintern as a not-so-veiled cipher for the real-life encounter of post-Soviet Estonia with the institutions of the European Union. However, Rantanen is curious about the production of hegemonic meanings of "Europe" that position the Eastern European Member States within liminal spaces relative to the "proper" EU. The chapter takes the game up as a second-order representation of the EU's approach to Eastern partnership and enlargement, finding that it mirrors the disillusioned and disappointed Estonian experience of the integration process. Moreover, the world of *Disco Elysium* discursively reflects Estonia's liminal position relative to Western European identities. While the Moralintern's invasion of Revachol is analogous neither to the restoration of Estonian independence from its status as a Soviet republic in August 1991 nor to Estonian accession into the EU following a referendum in 2003, the game does offer usefully defamiliarized depictions of "the perspective of the losers" when it comes to EU membership conditionalities.

Lacombe-Kishibe's chapter begins by shifting the analysis to the level of the sovereign individual and also picks up on the question of memory within the game's procedural mechanics. Crucial here is the plot element of amnesia and the running dialogue between the various parts of the protagonist's personality, which set the game up as an exploration of a "polyphonic ludic subjectivity." This occurrence of fractured subjectivity is not limited to the case of Harry Du Bois, however. It is also reflected in the fictional world around him. For example, the game's political backstory centers around the occupation of Revachol by the Moralintern as they sought to suppress the revolution. For Lacombe-Kishibe, the tension between the setting's background politics and the traumatized subjects found throughout the game offers an opportunity to contextualize *Disco Elysium*'s polyphony in political-historical terms. His chapter turns to Žižek's distinction between subjective and objective violence before looking at how the game's fractured subjectivities are contextualized by and within the liberal world order's regime of power.

In a similar move, Vuori's chapter also refers to the level of individual sovereignty, but this time returning to the question of embodiment and the search for ontological security. Harry begins the game in a state of total ontological insecurity. Yet, as the game progresses, the player is presented with a number of choices for joining political communities that can provide Harry with recognition. While some of these build a sustainable sense of subjectivity, others are predicated on othering and belittlement, building a sense of ontological wholeness only at the cost of further isolation and, ultimately, insecurity further down the road. For Vuori, the protagonist's means for achieving ontological security is a question the game leaves open. Taken all together, *Disco Elysium* is a useful pedagogical device for understanding the politics of ontological insecurity, pointing to how the study of computer games in general can be a worthwhile object of study in this area.

In Section Four, the chapters turn to focus on the game's portrayal of the complexities of political power in the struggle for liberation. The section begins

with Rossdale's chapter on the game's critical engagement with policing. It is not immediately clear that the game takes a critical line on policing. Indeed, the game's marketing materials ask, "What Kind of Cop Are You?" suggesting a relative agnosticism on the question of policing itself. Nevertheless, the political backstory of the game bespeaks a certain critique of the concept of mastery, itself a pillar of the modern notion of the sovereign self. Through humor and other techniques, *Disco Elysium* subverts the detective fiction genre at the level of the very notion of mastery. In the end, says Rossdale, the game's critique of mastery stops short as a testimony to how ubiquitous and deep-rooted the quest for mastery is in modern Western culture. This is clear in how it is not just the RCM but also the Dockworkers' Union and the mercenaries from Krenel that constitute policing bodies. Yet the ultimate lesson of Harry's story is one of reconciling with failure and contingency, and the story of each of these policing bodies bespeaks the political stakes at the heart of the struggle for mastery.

In Chapter 11, Kolehmainen takes up the question of how the game represents fascism. It picks up on arguments by Michael Kimmel and Corey Robin about aggrieved entitlement as an emotional anchor of far-right ideology, constituted by a sense of denied ownership over the world and a nostalgia for control. As Kolehmainen notes, becoming a fascist in the game involves making misogynistic or racist statements and then accepting the prompts offered by the game, reflecting a degree of agnosticism on questions of precise orthodoxy. The player can interact with fascism through encounters with several in-game characters, each of whom depicts different facets of how fascism responds to such grievances, channeling them toward its basic ideological tenets and converting them into ideological fuel. Yet the game uses humor in these encounters to show how fascism can also emerge from unconventional quarters. In the unexpected case of Measurehead's bizarre racial pseudoscience, for example, the game breaks with its cognitively recognizable Estonian context in order to pose the emergence of reactionary ideologies as a plausible risk in all manner of nostalgic formations, be they localist, transnational or something else altogether.

Taking up the theme of disability and liberation, Castro's chapter notes that the game self-consciously presents itself as something of a freak show, putting sick, disabled and mentally ill characters on display for the player's entertainment. However, they say, portrayals of disability in the game are also integral to the game's critique of capitalism and liberal modernity. Key here is the notion of "staring," which gives agency to "ex-human" accounts of life in order to subvert modern ideals about abledness and the sovereign state. For Castro, the genealogy of ableism and politics can be traced back to Hobbes, who attempted to solve the problem of establishing radical equality by subsuming bodily difference within the sovereign will of the modern liberal state. The game shows that subjects who superficially appear abled, or even hyperabled, are often anything but—surfacing a contingent, assemblage-based ontology of the body-mind that opens unexpected avenues for political agency.

Massone's chapter closes this section with an examination of Harry's pursuit of euphoria and oblivion through Sartre's notion of bad faith. Massone recalls the opening scenes of the game, and Harry's stark passage from a state of "warm, primordial blackness" into the sick self-awareness of Sartrean "nausea." This leads to the pursuit of euphoria, a promise of proximity to unadulterated joy. Like any human, Harry must navigate the contradictions between his past realities and future possibilities. He indulges in drugs, relationships, art and even politics—showing how we are all compelled to distract ourselves from the absurdity of an arbitrary life. Says Massone, however, Sartrean bad faith can lead not only to self-destruction but also to reevaluation and transformation. In something of a tension with Rossdale then, Massone contends that the game never adopts a judgmental stance toward our dialectical relationship with bad faith, but points rather toward an option of mastery over how we are all bound to move to our inevitable end.

The final section of the volume contains two brief responses from IR scholars who have written previously on computer gaming. The first, from Ciută, is a first-person reflection on what it means to play a computer game as an IR scholar. This question is not straightforward. For IR scholars are beings who, due to social expectations, will "inevitably" tend to see IR in everything around them. And while "each player" does bring an irreducible subjectivity to the gameplay, it risks a certain narcissism of "self-confirmation." By what lights can an IR scholar write on *Disco Elysium* without assuming they know more about the game than, say, a highly dedicated fan who completed multiple playthroughs and is deeply familiar with its lore and fan communities? Admittedly, few besides IR scholars are suited to the task of addressing how *Disco Elysium* and IR can be added together. Yet humility is required here, says Ciută. For when "aesthetic IR" tries to have the last word, it disavows its own identity problem. Is it still IR theory, or has it become something else?

The second response, and the last chapter in the volume, is from Nick Robinson, who offers two provocations to help us further situate the present book in relation to the study of popular culture and world politics. The first concerns the study of "popular culture as mirror." In this approach, scholars can use IR theory and/or theory from allied disciplines as toolboxes to help us read computer games and other pop-cultural artifacts as estranged conceptual models that might nonetheless help us understand our world. These aids can be applied pedagogically, for example, assisting us in the distillation or isolation of various dynamic aspects of our world in order to help students better "capture" the theories they are studying and advance their understandings of them. Alternatively, such aids can also be applied to the task of opening our own world up to critique. Thusly, as the subtitle of this volume suggests, many of the contributions to this volume take up *Disco Elysium* as "a Marxist Estonian Video Game" that can be interrogated using concepts from IR theory and adjacent disciplines to assess events and tendencies related to contemporary capitalist political economy, globalization, imperialism, identity essentialism and so on.

As Robinson notes, however, there is also a second possibility. Picking up on Weber's (2009) work on film, he suggests that artifacts can also contain critical

insights and engagements with the world that can be applied back upon IR theory. Here, the point is less to use the artifact as an instrument to assist us in capturing or distilling an element of a theory before then applying it to the world, but rather to glean critical insights from the artifact that might help us expose unconsciously held assumptions within the theory itself. However, this work of revealing and critiquing "foundations," as Robinson puts it, is not straightforward. For the playing, experiencing, and reading of a game like *Disco Elysium* is necessarily an encounter with contingency, both for scholar and gamer alike. The upshot here, for Robinson, is a series of potential future research questions, including unevenness in global gaming audience reception, the shifting politics of genre esteem, and the vulnerabilities of game workers to exploitation and overwork in a time of industry consolidation.

As a work of "theory capture," to borrow Robinson's term, this collection should be of interest to IR scholars curious about the estrangement effects of a work of speculative fiction examining a magically post-Soviet Estonian perspective on globalization and late capitalism that simultaneously undermines common parochial and essentializing oppositions in IR between a coherent West and a colonized Rest. Yet this is also the first volume-length collection in PCWP to offer a sustained engagement on a pop cultural artifact that encompasses not just its narratives and/or cinematic properties but also the estrangement effects constituted by its procedurality and gameplay, and also within its globally active online fan community. We hope the reader will find the following studies on the intertextuality of video games, focusing in particular on one of the most remarked-upon independent video games in recent years, to be a provocative and stimulating contribution to the field.

## Note

1. Disco Elysium won the "Fresh Indie Game Award" at the 2019 Game Awards (kotakuinternational 2019) and was the 2019 *USGamer* "Game of The Year" (McCarthy 2019). The media review website *Slant Magazine* declared it one of "the 100 best video games of all time" (Staff 2020), while well-known gamer site *IGN* said it was one of the "top 100 video games of all time" (IGN 2019), and it has been described in similar terms by *USA Today* (GLHF 2022), *Sports Illustrated* (Young 2023), and by *GQ* (White and Leedham 2023). ⏎

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# 2 What kind of cop are we, detective? community engagement on r/Discoelysium

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## Introduction: a detective RPG?

Whether considered as a commercial product or a literary intervention, the long-term success of a contemporary video game hinges on community engagement. Discussion drives sales and sales yield updates and expansions, thereby generating further material for discussion. Publishers and developers thus work to engender community engagement via sponsorship and elaborate marketing campaigns that continue past the game's initial release. Typically, structural support for long-lived games gradually declines over time. Downloadable content (DLC) stops being produced, funding for competitive events is cut, influencer sponsorship contracts expire, and servers are eventually shut down. Low-overhead mechanisms to encourage community engagement, such as seasonal rewards (e.g., battle passes, where players unlock cosmetic content by playing, optionally paying for additional unlocks and shortcuts) or secondary-engagement-specific rewards (e.g., *Counter Strike 2* (2012) rewards players for watching broadcasts of professional matches), exist, though these require prior player buy-in. Empowering players to modify the game experience can greatly enhance a title's longevity or even fundamentally reinvent the game itself (e.g., *Defense of the Ancients* and other mobile online battle arena (MOBA) titles such as *League of Legends* (2009) originate from a player-created modification to the real-time strategy game *Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne* (2003)). Moreover, big-budget game developers and publishers frequently impose "crunch" on their workers (Cote and Harris 2021), a term to denote extended periods of unremunerated overtime in preparation for the launch of a new game in a bid to maintain top-of-mind presence with their consumers (Marchand and Hennig-Thurau 2013).

As the gaming industry has surpassed the turnover of music production and media streaming services combined (Arora 2023), it has become highly competitive and its products have begun to play a significant role in popular culture, where independently produced titles can easily be pressed into the margins of the attention economy (Aral 2021). Curiously, *Disco Elysium*'s developer ZA/UM has offered no such engagement infrastructure to its players. It is an independently published, single-player game that features no login rewards and is difficult to modify. The persistence of discussions surrounding *Disco Elysium*, in this volume and beyond, must thus hinge on the base game's ability to inspire engagement—but how can a game of such modest origins achieve this?

The description of r/DiscoElysium (https://www.reddit.com/r/DiscoElysium/), one of the places where the game's community congregates, offers a first clue: "The world's greatest existential dread simulator." *Disco Elysium* clearly elicits a psychological response from players,

as 114,000 subscribers have since subscribed to the subreddit. Its treatment of themes such as addiction, mental illness, neurodivergence, race and class likely makes its narrative sustainably engaging to players. These themes treat differences and textures whose social tensions can instill dread, as the text impels players to question themselves and their social contexts. A recent thread on the subreddit discussed this at a meta level:

> [original post] I thought they were really funny, choosing those options for strangers to maybe throw them off, or try to create some faux rapport. I didn't know the game would actually consider you a fascist or a communist, I thought the "thoughts" were just jokes when they pop up. Kim, at the ending, then started saying that I was an ultranational with communist ideals, as well as being more than a little racist. I chose those options because I thought they were being ironic :(
>
> [reply] Powerful commentary on what it means to be an edgelord.[1]
>
> [child reply] "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be." Kurt Vonnegut, Mother Night (2024)

The goal of this chapter is to better understand the game's appeal as a text and a basis for social engagement. The chapter argues that its combination of an immersive and nuanced setting, innovative game mechanics, and a particular treatment of personal identity and political ideology allows for broad, nuanced and self-sustaining community engagement. In particular, I consider the innovative and sometimes unintuitive intersection of *Disco Elysium*'s gameplay (ludus) and its themes (narrative) as particularly important. The game can disempower the player without the pitfall of doing away with the suspension of disbelief, which is a common problem of games that seek to subvert player expectations in service of their narrative. By confronting the player with its setting in this manner, *Disco Elysium* becomes highly engaging as both interactive media and as a political text. This chapter proceeds first to contextualize the game and some of its themes, then briefly describes the methods used and finally provides a discussion of text analysis as applied to the game-specific r/DiscoElysium subreddit, which is one of the game's most popular online spaces.

## 2.1 Contextualizing Elysium: ludonarrative, marginality and online spaces

To situate *Disco Elysium*'s formula for success, this section reviews three distinct bodies of literature. These are political theory to understand *Disco Elysium*'s subversion of common tropes/themes, ludonarrative theory as a framework to understand player engagement and a brief discussion of marginality for some of the common concepts presented by the chapter's text analysis. The section closes with a discussion of Reddit's significance as an online space.

To first locate the politics of gaming as an artform, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter's *Games of Empire* (2009) grapples with the political commitments implicit in the design philosophy of games in the age of planetary, militarized hyper-capitalism, a term borrowed from Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2001). The authors argue for an understanding of games as paradigmatic of contemporary empire. They are embedded in industries that regularly rely on expropriation and the exploitation of labor, and that often draw their themes from imperial histories. The material substance of which games and gaming devices are constructed (circuit boards and other computing devices) are frequently sourced from the periphery of contemporary empire: lower-middle-income economies where supply chains cannot or will not be ethically audited, invisibilizing and furthering exploitation (Gold, Trautrims, and Trodd 2015). At their most critical, games can help disrupt the administration of empire by offering a window into the consequences of its use. At their worst, they reify extant power relations. Think here of the

U.S. Army-sponsored, "extremely cost-efficient" advertisement in the shape of the video game *America's Army* (2002; Nieborg 2004, 6), or the military-training-simulator-turned-commercial product *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004; King 2005). This contrasts with 11 bit's *This War of Mine* (2014), which foregrounds the marginal perspective of civilians in wartime instead of the commonplace viewpoint of the soldier/commander (Bjørkelo 2019). *Disco Elysium* preserves its ability to critique by explicitly situating itself in a setting that is at once desolate and hopeful, humorous and depressing, while offering an immersive role-playing experience to the player that refrains from directly stating its central thesis.

A primary limitation of video games as a medium is that a preset simulation's contents cannot provide a player with fundamental agency. This can be especially felt in linear story-based games, but the principle is omnipresent. Even the procedural generation of supposedly random environments in contemporary games consists of deterministic building blocks (Sorenson, Pasquier, and DiPaola 2011). The trick is to induce in players a sense of immersion and a suspension of disbelief, despite their knowledge of this limitation at the outset. To successfully convince players of the expansiveness of the game world and the freedom of choice they enjoy therein is thus a fundamental design challenge (Michailidis, Balaguer-Ballester, and He 2018).

Ludonarrative, first popularized by game designer Clint Hocking, refers to the relationship between a video game's gameplay (ludus) and its story (narrative). When these two elements align, sometimes referred to as ludonarrative consonance, they create a cohesive experience that reinforces the game's themes and player engagement. However, when they conflict—resulting in what Hocking describes as ludonarrative dissonance—the player may experience a disconnect between their actions and the story being told, reducing immersion and engagement. Game studies scholars have debated over whether narrative or ludus should hold primacy in analysis, but ludology cofounder Gonzalo Frasca's seminal conference paper on the matter (2003) meaningfully reconciles these epistemological divisions by emphasizing their overlapping scopes of inquiry.

Hocking's (2009) contention is that games cannot escape their intrinsic teleology. Even the most nonlinear games like *Disco Elysium* give determinate feedback based on player input. This fundamental interactivity makes video games feel urgent, authentic and compelling, but dissonance looms large if the relationship between input and feedback is disturbed. Games that promise narrative depth and nuance, but which are limited by simplified narrative conclusions, most clearly illustrate this phenomenon. Hocking's illustration is first-person shooter *Bioshock* (2007): in its final twist, the game's antagonist sardonically rebukes the player character (PC): "a man chooses, a slave obeys." The inevitability of the linear structure of the game, where the player always knew they had to obey the game's directions, diminishes this narrative payoff. Similarly, third-person shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* features a narrative that berates the player for being violent (the only valid behavior in a shooter) (Payne 2014; Yager Development 2012). The virtual world of the role-playing game *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* is often unresponsive to player behavior: killing police officers in the game's overworld does not affect player eligibility to take on quests offered by the same police precinct (Eidos-Montréal 2011; Hbomberguy 2022). Ludonarrative dissonance, if not carefully employed, can take players out of the game and undermine their interest in returning altogether.

In *Disco Elysium*, the corpse outside the window of the player's starting location serves as a primary point of departure for player exploration. But the design of the game's systems suggests that a laser-focused experience is not what the developers intended for the player. Instead, the heavy emphasis on pluralism in the game's mechanics, such as Harry Du Bois's (the PC) often contradictory subconscious, suggests a more open-ended approach. The PC's collective self is not a simple translation of player intent into the game (Vella and Cielecka

2021). Some of the game's expression is probabilistic (such as rolling dice to pass or fail skill checks), some of it is dependent on the illusion of choice (narrative loops such as quests, with multiple ways to solve the problem they pose) and some of it is deterministic but obscured to the player (such as which skills express themselves as part of Harry's customizable subconscious—each aspect of which becomes more expressive/dormant as players invest more/fewer skill points into them). By decentering the player's ability to translate intent into outcome via these mechanics, *Disco Elysium* sidesteps dissonance in favor of a sense of guided unpredictability. Decisions that may constitute a failure seen from outside (such as throwing a pétanque ball into the sea) may well constitute a successful skill check for Harry. The game sidesteps the neurotypical notion of an internal monologue in favor of a "subconscious parliament" of sorts, where Harry's mind is primarily represented by whichever aspects are invested in by the player. Often these voices pop up unprompted, as the game heavily features concealed dice rolls to decide whether to expose the player to a given quote or encounter. In-game, this translates to a plural subconscious, which can force the player to "say one of these communist or fascist ideas or fuck off." The setting of the game, an impoverished neighborhood consumed by its occupation forces, and the player's point of view of Harry Du Bois's internally dissonant character both work together to emphasize dissonance as ingrained in the setting itself, rather than existing only between the player and the game. This makes for a compelling experience where players do not feel necessarily in control, but are rather in dialogue with a complex personal, social, material and political environment. *Disco Elysium* is thus adept at deploying a sense of dissonance that heightens investment in the setting rather than simply pushing players away.

This player experience of productive dissonance takes the shape of an encounter with some permutation of the game's marginalities in each playthrough. The city and its inhabitants stay the same, but their expression differs as the PC's skill point allocations differ. Mehretu, Pigozzi and Sommers (2000) define marginality as "a complex condition of disadvantage that individuals and communities may experience because of vulnerabilities that may arise from unequal or inequitable environmental, ethnic, cultural, social, political and economic factors" (90). The dockworkers' conflict is perhaps the clearest example of leveraged marginality. They are a community whose bargaining position is eroded by multinational corporations forcing lucrative concessions via (the threat of) violence and/or a rerouting of their supply chain to exclude the workers. More important, however, is the game's depiction of contingent marginality: the atomization of the community is primarily a result of the exploitative and unpredictable nature of free-market forces. The neighborhood of Martinaise, as a result, is deprived of genuine economic opportunity and development, as well as the socio-cultural recognition necessary for long-term change.

The overall narrative emphasizes the "duress" (Stoler 2016) that marks Martinaise. Its sociopolitical environment is decisively shaped by longstanding exposure to both structural and direct violence. The design decision to fully voice non-playable characters enhances their lifelike appearance, as they articulate their station in life through their choice of words and inflections. This added layer of vocal expression brings depth to their characters, making their experiences and perspectives more tangible to the player. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Hejná (2023) argue that the social landscape that a virtual world's inhabitants construct invites players to reflect on their own place within it, as well as the virtual world's mirroring of the one they themselves inhabit. Furthermore, the virtual built environment of Martinaise, the neighborhood where the game is set, also aims to instill an awareness of the duress of post-conflict violence in the players. The dilapidated structures echo the consequences of the Communist revolution and subsequent world war that form the backdrop of *Disco Elysium*. The traces are so clear that Harry can conceptualize the outline of a mass execution site if the

player invested sufficient points into the relevant skill. Other more contemporaneous environments, like the game's bookstore and church, offer direct external sources of lore exposition (Wołek 2022).

Marginality does not need to be purely economic. Marcuse (1996) and Wacquant (2008) *inter alia* observed that exclusion and abbreviation of rights and privileges may come about in any society that hierarchically organizes access to these based on majority-norm conformity. Revocation of these rights and privileges then instigates economic precarity as opportunities are erased, leading to a vicious cycle. In *Disco Elysium*, the Racist Lorry Driver is marginal in terms of his conditions of employment, as is the Paledriver. Their labor under harsh conditions renders them marginalized. While economically relatively more secure, the homosexuality, migration background and labor precarity as a sex worker render the Smoker on the Balcony marginal in multiple intersecting ways. His regular meetings with foreign bureaucrat Sunday Friend may seriously imperil his social and economic prospects. Steban the Student Communist and Cindy the Skull are socially and politically marginal, in that their political convictions are disfavored by contemporary Revachol. Even Joyce Messier, despite the economic capital she represents, is subject to a gendered kind of marginality. *Disco Elysium*, as such, is a reflection on the overarching consequences of sociopolitical turmoil that affect different people in different ways but spare no one.

Political ideologies feature heavily in the game, animating the majority of the game's inhabitants and explored in detail in the political vision quests. As in real life, they offer an explanation for why things are the way they are. Fascism's internal contradictions force (a fascist) Harry to continually find ways to cope with the weaknesses of a purported ideology of strength. Communism's spectacular disintegration drives (a communist) Harry to deconstruct idealistic nostalgia in service of a reaffirmed hope for the future despite present circumstances, and ultraliberalism shows (a liberal) Harry in the throes of social construction until the lack of material change resulting from the ideology makes itself known upon the conclusion of the questline that supports it. *Disco Elysium* as a game knows its medium-specific pleasures very well and takes a nuanced approach to position-taking. Communism is the only ideology that survives complete deconstruction by the game's possibility space[2] because the writers present it as a source of hope rather than a cynical or self-contradictory indictment of the in-world recent past and present. This differential, which primarily antagonizes fascism and satirizes capitalism, guides players in their evaluation of the game and the assumptions with which they approach it. It is rare that fascism appears as fully fleshed out in a video game as it does in *Disco Elysium*, and it makes every effort to debunk the ideology's (self-)destructive nature (see Kolehmainen, this volume). Thus, while dissent and alienation are key characteristics of the virtual world, they serve a discursive purpose.

As a last thing to consider before introducing the quantitative analysis, Gekker and Joseph (2021) performed a qualitative analysis of community response to *Disco Elysium*'s "working class update," meant to enhance accessibility of the game through various optimization techniques allowing the game to run better on less advanced computers. The authors evaluate the radical rhetoric of *Disco Elysium*'s developers, the artistic collective ZA/UM and its community response. They conclude that while the notion of a "working class game" is laudable, independently published games struggle to escape the entrenched exploitation that marks the gaming industry—relying on fan labor for the purposes of language localization, as well as the tacit recognition of the still-significant socio-material entry barrier for digital media such as video games. Such a qualitative analysis offers the capacity to outline how a fandom interacts with this moment of tension in the game's development cycle and shows the dissonance and friction between developer/community wants (a democratization of gaming) and needs (deliverable products in a competitive timeframe). Despite the richness and granularity that

this approach offers, the volume of community interaction on even one internet forum outstrips the analytical capacity of purely qualitative content analysis. To offer a lower-resolution but more structural image of community discourse, this chapter relies on quantitative text analysis of data gathered on Reddit. And it is to this topic that we turn in the next section.

## 2.2 Reddit: data and methods

Reddit is an online collection of user-created and moderated topic-specific discussion boards, called subreddits. Its front page is populated with the most popular posts on any of the boards, and as such advertises itself as "the front page of the internet." Anderson (2015) provides a comprehensive and scholarly introduction to the platform, its mechanics and some of its overarching sub-cultural practices. She proposes that Reddit's value lies primarily in its strong sense of community, belonging and validation when user-submitted content is engaged with. While different subreddits adhere to their own sets of community-specific rules, Reddit proactively outlines general conventions, or "reddiquette," to be followed by all users ("Reddiquette" 2023). Most important and first of these: "remember the human" and "adhere to the same standard of behavior online that you follow in real life." The larger a subreddit, the more present its moderation team usually is in enforcing reddiquette and community rules. Subreddits that contain or are dedicated to the lived experiences of vulnerable populations, such as r/TwoXchromosomes[3] and r/BlackPeopleTwitter,[4] may ban users, prevent new users from posting to prevent brigading,[5] or restrict users' posting ability to create a safer online space. Anderson suggests that readers get started with Reddit to connect with peers and reach out to their community on dedicated subreddits. This chapter follows this perspective by arguing for Reddit as a relatively safe, expression-driven space for congregation around specific topics.

Reddit attracts visitors, advertisers and researchers alike. Reddit user u/Stuck_In_The_Matrix (2015) organized the platform's posts between Reddit's founding in 2006 and 2015 into a browsable database, and the website allows users to scrape specific sections of the website via its application programming interface (API), the parameters of which can be altered by programs such as the Python Reddit API wrapper (PRAW) (Boe 2023), which is the package this chapter uses to scrape the r/DiscoElysium subreddit. Medvedev, Lambiotte, and Delvenne (2019)'s review of the scholarship based on u/Stuck_In_The_Matrix's Reddit dataset shows that the dataset attracts primary attention from Natural Language Processing and score prediction scholarship. Another systematic review of scholarship across disciplines that use Reddit as a data source, by Proferes et al. (2021), suggests that most of these publications sample more than 1 million posts/comments and skew toward Computer Science, Engineering and Mathematics journals. Horne, Adali, and Sikdar (2017) approach Reddit in a similar fashion as this chapter, though in their case Reddit is a source of data around which a predictive model is based. They demonstrate that sentiment analysis is a helpful tool in locating the most-discussed subjects on a given subreddit. This is further supported by Shen and Rudzicz (2017), who achieved 91% accuracy in finding anxiety-related comments on anxiety-related subreddits by using approximately 23,000 comments scraped via Reddit's API. The present chapter inverses this principle, taking the subreddit's top posts as a given and reasoning backward from its contents, while also relying on sentiment analysis. With this move, the chapter hopes to contribute to content-centric analysis of Reddit data and provide insight into the structural characteristics of the r/DiscoElysium community.

To perform this study, the Python Reddit Application Programming Interface Wrapper, PRAW, was used to scrape the 1,000 most-upvoted posts and their comments from

r/DiscoElysium, which at the time of writing has 114,000 subscribers (Table 2.1). These 1,000 posts include 54,000 user comments. The next step was to clean the corpus and prepare it for text analysis: lemmatizing[6] the words of individual posts, removing stop words and interpunction to streamline the language content, and omitting special characters. Raw word frequency tables were then tabulated to get an early sense of topics to look out for, which then formed the basis for a sentence-level sentiment analysis for each of the topics identified. Together, these analyses provided a survey of the kinds of content and subjects that most visibly animate this online space.[7]

Reddit uses an "embedded tree" structure (Medvedev, Lambiotte, and Delvenne 2019, 3), wherein a subreddit shows a list of posts, which when opened produce a series of comment chains where users can respond to the post (the first comment of a chain) and to one another's comments (subsequent comments, also referred to as child comments). To aid user navigation of the subreddit, flairs may be created by moderators, and users may filter subreddit content by using these flairs. In the case of *Disco Elysium*, these flairs are generalist but meaningfully distinguish content types. As a proxy for user engagement, the ratio between the average upvote and average comment volumes of different content types has been computed.

Shifman (2013) defines memes as self/interferential pieces of humoristic user-generated content meant for remixing and sharing. Because of this, memes take a central role in online culture and often are the most popular type of content on Reddit. "Fanart" and "Media" share some content overlap, but the former is meant to refer to user-generated content posted to the subreddit with a greater emphasis on artistic license than memes, whereas the latter could include content cross-posted from other subreddits or websites such as video essays analyzing the game's theme. "Discussion" threads are text-based environments to talk about the game or its community. "Questions" and "Announcements" are the least frequently occurring as their subject range is the narrowest among the available flairs.

*Table 2.1* One thousand top-voted posts on r/DiscoElysium ⏎

| *Post Flair* | *Occurrence Frequency* | *Average Comments* | *Average Upvote Count* | *Average Comments Per Upvote* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Meme** | 277 | 87 | 3,389 | 0.026 |
| **Fanart** | 186 | 78 | 2,463 | 0.032 |
| **Media** | 98 | 75 | 2,068 | 0.036 |
| **Discussion** | 68 | 98 | 1,543 | 0.063 |
| **Question** | 6 | 138 | 1,948 | 0.071 |
| **Announcement** | 5 | 96 | 1,042 | 0.092 |

Table 2.1 shows an inverse relationship between the amount of upvotes a given flared piece of content receives and the number of comments it attracts. Announcements often are issued by either moderators or the development team itself and "stickied/stuck" to the top of the subreddit—attracting upvotes and comments. Questions offer a direct call to discussion and therefore are most likely to attract the most comments and the highest question-to-upvote ratio. Memes relate invariably to Harry's predispositions, the absurdity of his being a cop, and provide a window through which players can reflect on their own lives as a refraction of *Disco Elysium*'s world. Nevertheless, memes can be seen as "low effort" or niche. They are part of the self/interreferential nature of shareable in-group humor, catering to only some audiences even within a subcultural space (Phillips 2015). This may help explain the low upvote/comment ratio. Fanart offers another direct venue for interaction, while other flaired

posts are more multifarious—including appearances of the game in other real-life contexts, cosplays,[8] emulations of the game's art styles and discussions of the game's political themes in a non-question/answer format.

As comments may be as superficial as a thread of commenters offering agreement by all simultaneously posting "this," threads were selected for study only when they attracted more than 200 comments. This resulted in a yield of twenty-five posts or 2.5% of the total scraped dataset's posts. These account for 7,000 comments, which account for 13% of the total scraped dataset's comments. Of these twenty-five threads, fourteen are flaired memes, six are discussions, three media, and one announcement, one fanart and one question. Compared to the subreddit cross-section of 1,000 threads, memes are overrepresented and fanart almost entirely absent. The single-occurrence content types are respectively: the Announcement of *The Final Cut*, the fully rounded-out version of *Disco Elysium*; a fanart post of a near-perfect portrayal of a Harry and Kim cosplay at a convention during the COVID-19 pandemic (this had an impact on comment counts as users debated the ethics of convention attendance); and a question on the Deserter's quote that capital's "mask of humanity" has to be taken off "to kill everyone," as a realization "that the bourgeois are not human"—with the poster asking "what are the best examples of the mask of humanity falling from capital [in real life]." The discussion threads at the time of writing, as a matter of unfortunate overlap, are mainly concerned with the then-ongoing controversy involving the ZA/UM artistic collective, the development studio, and its (former) staff members. The media posts contain speculation about the intellectual property's future beyond *Disco Elysium*, such as projects with different development studios at the helm. This general overview provides some context as to the most visible aspects of the community's concerns—ranging from the game to its subtexts, its producers and the future of its creative direction. The content of the discussions themselves, however, remains too large to parse manually.

To get a sense of the discourse, the Natural Language Processing Toolkit (NLTK) package for Python was used. This package is equipped with a suite of text importing, cleaning and analysis tools. The script devised for this chapter exported the comments from these twenty-five threads, including author, upvote count, comment body and comment ID metadata. The truncated, tokenized corpus of text (nearly 78,000 tokens) was then counted and tabulated, after which other connective words were removed. The results of this process are shown in Table 2.2. The table's rank column refers to the frequency of the word's incidence in the entire corpus. The tabulation offers an entry point into discussions about the game's themes and their real-world counterparts. The relative absence of most "moderate" incarnations of the ideologies the game deals with is noteworthy: socialism appears far less frequently than communism, and capitalism is the only direct stand-in for both fictional moralism and various other strands of liberalism. Another important finding is the foregrounding of a lexicon of change, ranging from "revolution" to "better," but the association that users have with these terms cannot be determined using only a frequency count.

To generate an understanding of how terminology is used in the r/DiscoElysium subreddit, users' frequency count was complemented with a sentiment analysis. The Natural Language Toolkit (Hardeniya et al. 2016) includes the VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary for Sentiment Reasoning) module (Hutto and Gilbert 2014), which uses predetermined association scores with words in context. It is essentially the pretrained output of a deep learning algorithm, meaning it can process any set of tokens at the cost of not being trained to assign word-level valuations in cadence with any particular subcultural vernacular. To introduce use-context, comments were tokenized at the sentence level rather than the word level, at which the frequency tabulation tokenizes the dataset. To avoid spuriousness within the limits of the sample's size, terms with at least twenty-five valid sentence-length observations are shown in Table 2.3,

omitting "political," "actually," "literally," "bad," "never," "could," and "better." This also filters out retorts and sentences written using unorthodox spellings and symbols.

*Table 2.2* Select entries of comment corpus frequency count after tokenization ⏎

| *Rank* | *Word* | *Frequency* | *Rank* | *Word* | *Frequency* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **4** | game | 6,826 | 62 | ideology | 1,084 |
| **8** | people | 4,540 | 65 | want | 1,058 |
| **11** | think | 3,412 | 69 | anything | 974 |
| **12** | communism | 3,334 | 71 | kim | 944 |
| **21** | communist | 2,160 | 75 | literally | 912 |
| **25** | world | 1,956 | 77 | communists | 910 |
| **27** | time | 1,870 | 80 | system | 872 |
| **31** | point | 1,616 | 82 | different | 868 |
| **32** | elysium | 1,596 | 87 | capitalist | 856 |
| **33** | know | 1,594 | 88 | shit | 848 |
| **34** | capitalism | 1,526 | 98 | revolution | 814 |
| **39** | something | 1,418 | 108 | zaum | 784 |
| **40** | actually | 1,416 | 116 | love | 758 |
| **41** | harry | 1,390 | 129 | countries | 716 |
| **42** | could | 1,384 | 130 | money | 702 |
| **43** | bad | 1,382 | 169 | company | 588 |
| **45** | political | 1,308 | 172 | union | 578 |
| **48** | never | 1,248 | 173 | socialist | 576 |
| **49** | made | 1,238 | 188 | character | 542 |
| **51** | better | 1,168 | 193 | fascist | 538 |
| **55** | work | 1,142 | 195 | power | 536 |
| **59** | mean | 1,116 | 196 | capital | 534 |
| **60** | us | 1,094 | 201 | politics | 526 |

VADER uses a scoring system for words that varies between +4 for maximum positive association and -4 for maximum negative association. Importantly, the average score is weighted as the sentiment values are assigned on a continuous spectrum. A minority of positive observations, as is the case with the "company" keyword, may tip the sentiment score into a positive average despite a larger amount of neutral or negative sentiment observations. Notably, we see a distinct lack of very positive keywords and an overabundance of relatively neutral evaluations of terms, even for "fascism," which is more favorably estimated than "shit." This is likely a result of, on the one hand, a more in-depth consideration of most topics given the game's text-heavy content and approach and, on the other hand, a shortcoming of VADER, where sentence-level sentiment is a simple weighted average of the word-level tokens considered together within a single sentence-level token. For example, the average sentiment score of a trigram construction like "fascism loves power" will approach a more positive sentiment score than "fascism" or "fascism is power" because of the presence of the very positively ascribed term "love."

Some of these findings are to be expected: commenters enjoy discussions about the "game" ($n$ = 3,458) more than "anything" ($n$ = 470). The discourse around "socialist" is more interesting, as this term frequently is referred to in reference to real-world events, Marxist philosophy, material dialectics in particular, the instigation of socialist rebellions and the material conditions of possibility for engendering change toward a socialist reorganization of various societies around the world. Considering the terms "socialist," "capitalism," "capitalist," various renditions of "communism," "fascist" and "fascism" reveals a rhetoric that mimics a more negative view across the board. In particular, the majority share of negative comments that mention "capitalist" and "capitalism" are directly concerned with genocides users hold capitalist governments and governance accountable for. This is offset by sarcastic rhetoric mostly on the changes in ZA/UM's development leadership, which artificially inflates its sentiment score. For "communism"—the only positively evaluated "-ism"—the reverse is true. While its negative score is to do with the failure of communist government to provide common goods, its positive score is mainly steadied by game-specific discussions about the morality of, among others, the communist political vision quest, the necessity of holding out hope for change in the future and the victories of socialist regimes in establishing key public services. The lack of highly negative sentiment regarding fascism is primarily caused by the community's discussion of its more light-hearted representation in *Disco Elysium*. By contrast, all comments directly dealing with the political commitments of fascist ideology have at least a neutral and often an overwhelmingly negative connotation. Aside from the sentiment scores of the respective ideologies that *Disco Elysium* discusses, the frequency of discussion offers insight as well. Communism is referenced almost twice as frequently as fascism and capitalism taken together, signaling significant player interest coupled with a more positive associative evaluation of the term.

*Table 2.3* The sentiment analysis of all word tokens within the sentence context ⏎

| *Keyword* | *Average Score* | *SUM Obs* | *% Pos* | *% Neg* | *% Neu* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Love** | 0.543 | 342 | 89% | 9% | 2% |
| **Game** | 0.144 | 3,458 | 53% | 29% | 18% |
| **Elysium** | 0.132 | 755 | 50% | 26% | 24% |
| **Made** | 0.115 | 594 | 50% | 34% | 16% |
| **Something** | 0.111 | 675 | 50% | 32% | 18% |
| **Character** | 0.098 | 472 | 51% | 31% | 19% |
| **Time** | 0.085 | 1,020 | 47% | 32% | 20% |
| **Think** | 0.083 | 1,698 | 48% | 34% | 17% |
| **Money** | 0.082 | 314 | 45% | 34% | 21% |
| **Want** | 0.075 | 583 | 63% | 34% | 3% |
| **Work** | 0.075 | 679 | 43% | 33% | 24% |
| **Socialist** | 0.069 | 144 | 45% | 31% | 24% |
| **Politics** | 0.069 | 247 | 40% | 32% | 28% |
| **Kim** | 0.065 | 424 | 47% | 32% | 21% |
| **Identity** | 0.062 | 58 | 41% | 28% | 31% |
| **Point** | 0.057 | 850 | 44% | 37% | 19% |
| **Harry** | 0.049 | 623 | 45% | 35% | 20% |
| **World** | 0.047 | 960 | 45% | 38% | 18% |

| *Keyword* | *Average Score* | *SUM Obs* | *% Pos* | *% Neg* | *% Neu* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **System** | 0.040 | 516 | 42% | 36% | 22% |
| **Capitalist** | 0.036 | 281 | 48% | 39% | 13% |
| **Union** | 0.030 | 306 | 46% | 39% | 15% |
| **Know** | 0.027 | 847 | 39% | 32% | 29% |
| **Anything** | 0.023 | 470 | 41% | 39% | 20% |
| **ZAUM** | 0.021 | 69 | 49% | 33% | 17% |
| **Mean** | 0.021 | 749 | 39% | 35% | 26% |
| **Communism** | 0.013 | 1,439 | 40% | 38% | 21% |
| **Ideology** | 0.013 | 692 | 40% | 40% | 20% |
| **Capital** | 0.011 | 235 | 40% | 37% | 24% |
| **Company** | 0.003 | 344 | 36% | 41% | 23% |
| **Communists** | -0.002 | 1,782 | 39% | 41% | 20% |
| **People** | -0.007 | 2,098 | 43% | 42% | 15% |
| **Power** | -0.017 | 280 | 42% | 38% | 21% |
| **Countries** | -0.017 | 604 | 39% | 38% | 23% |
| **Capitalism** | -0.020 | 700 | 42% | 40% | 18% |
| **Fascism** | -0.051 | 199 | 44% | 48% | 8% |
| **Us** | -0.078 | 232 | 33% | 42% | 25% |
| **Revolution** | -0.096 | 443 | 33% | 47% | 19% |
| **Fascist** | -0.215 | 191 | 31% | 67% | 2% |
| **Shit** | -0.286 | 366 | 27% | 72% | 1% |

The main characters of *Disco Elysium*'s story, Harry Du Bois and Kim Kitsuragi, are both evaluated positively, though less so than the more generic term "character." Again, this may be distorted by "character" meaning multiple things, including the positively ascribed descriptor synonymous with integrity and principle. Interestingly enough, direct references to "identity" occur infrequently ($n$ = 58), despite much of the storyline's entanglement with self- and group identification. Nevertheless, most of the terms that meet the criteria for inclusion are identity-driven: they convey information about the value systems commenters use when submitting contributions. Both *Disco Elysium*'s detailed engagement with various ideologies, precarities and forms of gender expression, as well as the informal and often jargon-heavy discourse that characterizes online environments, most likely work to render discussions on r/DiscoElysium relatively nuanced. This is reflected in the frequency counts and average association values of the terms included in the sample. Another bit of evidence is the absence of expletives in the sample beyond "shit." Online discourse can be intentionally inflammatory as a means of carrying out subcultural policing (Phillips 2015; Nagle 2017) to the exclusion of already marginalized communities. The lack of explicitly exclusionary rhetoric in the most well-populated parts of this online space and the neutral evaluation of potentially polarizing terms point to a (relatively) safe environment for users of various backgrounds to come together. In the author's experience interacting with r/DiscoElysium over the course of approximately two years at the time of writing, it is rare to encounter exclusionary politics being practiced at the comment level, whether surreptitiously or otherwise.

When examining these findings, it is important to consider the limitations of the methods used, particularly the issues of imperfect context-sensitivity and the narrow conceptualization

of text as merely a mechanical instrument to convey meaning. The chapter acknowledges these limitations, noting that the analysis provides a characterization of a community that is too large to be effectively surveyed qualitatively. This is where the value of quantitative assessments of community communication becomes evident. As the volume of data and the specificity of analytical tools increase, these techniques are likely to grow more sophisticated over time, offering deeper insights into community dynamics and discourse.

## 2.3 Concluding remarks

This chapter has argued that *Disco Elysium* is engaging both as a political text and a video game. Its combination of atypical game mechanics and narrative themes, in particular its treatment of personal identity and political ideology, allows for broad, nuanced and self-sustaining community engagement. By conducting a text analysis, the chapter connects a quantitative analysis of one of the game's online spaces to previous analyses of video games and the setting and writing that make *Disco Elysium* an impressive work of art.

This was inspired by the persistent presence of a community for a functionally unsupported game—which is uncommon amidst an ever-intensifying struggle for consumers' attention on the part of mainstream, big-budget game development studios, which rely on proactive and structural community engagement as well as labor exploitation. The text analysis largely supports bodies of work that have evaluated the stylized politics and characters that populate the game and contributes to scholarship that seeks to use textual analysis for content evaluation purposes.

Community discourse on r/DiscoElysium is in no small part driven by shareable culture such as units like memes and fanart but includes significant amounts of substantive discussion of the game's underlying themes. By refraining from stipulating its core message too clearly, while reserving room for internal critique of the ideas it treats, the writing of the game helps players take positions in the space. In particular, the subtextual treatment of marginality and political ideology is reflected in community engagement, which looks favorably on left-wing ideologies as compared to the other worldviews that the text corpus encompasses. The community is also marked by a relative lack of inflammatory interaction between commenters on the most visible posts on the subreddit. These together point to a comparatively safe online environment where reasonably nuanced discussion of the game can take place.

The chapter is not without its limitations. Reddit captures only a part of *Disco Elysium*'s online community and features a distinct online subculture with a distinct set of norms and vocabulary, which a quantitative, non-learning-driven scoring algorithm can map with only partial accuracy. Further research in this area could synthesize qualitative and quantitative data over a longer period to offer a more nuanced understanding of community dynamics. Despite Martinaise being a recently war-torn, desolate and persistently conflict-ridden neighborhood, *Disco Elysium* does not seem to inculcate a hopelessness beyond reproach. It seems that this notion is quite present in the engagement of its players with the game, long after they have closed their respective case files.

## Notes

1. An edgelord is internet slang for a person with a provocative or otherwise (politically) extreme online presence. ⏎
2. A graph that visualizes all possible game states that a video game can display. ⏎

3. The subreddit description reads: "A subreddit for both serious and silly content and intended for women's perspectives. We are a welcoming subreddit and support the rights of all genders. Posts are moderated for respect, equanimity, grace, and relevance." ⏎
4. The subreddit description reads: "Screenshots of Black people being hilarious or insightful on social media, it doesn't need to just be Twitter but obviously that is best." ⏎
5. The practice of making multiple new social media accounts for the purposes of disrupting the flow of content and discussion in online spaces. ⏎
6. Removing non-word-root text. ⏎
7. Ideally, this could have been complemented with a content and network analysis of data taken from X, but this is no longer possible since the discontinuation of the Twitter API. Reddit is a particular part of the internet, and as such, the findings of this chapter must be limited to and viewed in consideration of its particularities. ⏎
8. A portmanteau of costume and play: the act of crafting and impersonating fictional characters, both historical and fictional. ⏎

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## Section two

# *Disco Elysium* and late capitalism

# 3 "I have holes in my brain"—the traumatic memory of the commune of Revachol

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## Introduction

Traumatic memory is in the limbo between remembering and forgetting. This memory is not simply missing; it exists in fragments, estranged and marred. In the course of a murder investigation, players of *Disco Elysium* are prompted to explore the history of Martinaise, a district of Revachol. The turbulent history of Martinaise has left an indelible mark on both its architecture and its people. By conversing with non-player characters (NPCs) and navigating the map of the game, the game vividly portrays a society torn between an impossible amnesia and unbearable memory. *Disco Elysium* offers an insightful view into the origins and societal consequences of traumatic memory.

In *Disco Elysium*, traumatic memory is closely tied to a significant historical event known as the Antecentennial Revolution, described by the writer and designer of the game, Justin Keenan, as "a failed global revolution that is the defining event of the game's backstory" (Croft 2021). The revolution, leaving its mark on the collective memory of Martinaise, also forged its collective identity. Regardless of their diverse ideological stances, all the NPCs define themselves in connection to these revolutionary events. The Antecentennial Revolution crystallizes the political divisions in Revachol and establishes the social foundations upon which the community depends.

Historians and social scientists have extensively examined the concept of collective memory. Maurice Halbwachs, a student of Émile Durkheim and Henri Bergson in the early 20th century, pioneered a novel perspective by viewing memory as a social construct. Social forces create, shape and sustain both individual and collective memory. In particular, collective memory is revived through public symbols and rituals, which serve as collective representations (Halbwachs 1925, 1997). Halbwachs' approach has been remarkably fruitful and impactful. Pierre Nora translated this philosophical and sociological approach into an ambitious historical project. Within the monumental volumes he edited, Nora focused primarily on *loci memoriae*, like public statues, which serve as the means for the nations to reinvigorate (or even create) its national collective memory (Nora et al. 1984, 1992). Research on collective memory and its institutionalization has emphasized its contribution to community-building. As memory is shaped by society and the act of remembering is inherently social, collective memory reflects the unique characteristics of a society.

In reaction to this literature, postcolonial scholars have highlighted the equal importance of what has slipped into oblivion. A regime of remembrance, defined as "an ensemble of statements, images, monuments of verbal and non-verbal knowledge about the past [that is] authorized, taught, celebrated, and repeated," entails the existence of a parallel "regime of forgetting." This regime of forgetting encompasses "an ensemble of statements, of images, that a nation keeps repressed, unauthorized, and prohibited in and through its institutions" (Hannoum 2019, 370). Former colonial empires are often selective when creating the official narratives of their colonial history. Conversely, the communities affected by present or historical colonization encounter challenges in constructing a collective memory freed from domination. Collective memory is not merely the aggregate of what is collectively recalled; it is also constructed by what has been collectively forgotten.

Established in the Antecentennial Revolution, the Commune of Revachol met a brutal end when the city fell under the control of the Coalition of Nations. Therefore, Martinaise emerges as the outcome of this traumatic history, shaped by both recollection and oblivion. In French, memory lapses are described as *des trous de mémoire*, literally "memory holes." *Disco Elysium*, known for its unique style, employs a comparable physical metaphor: it refers to "holes in the brain." This chapter begins with this metaphor as a foundation to examine the imprints of traumatic memory in Martinaise.

In exploring traumatic memory within *Disco Elysium*, this chapter asserts three points. First, *Disco Elysium* places amnesia and memory at its core. The presence of numerous amnesic characters and the collective amnesia regarding the Antecentennial Revolution prompt players to contemplate the construction of memory, and in turn, its potential shortcomings.

Second, traumatic memory is defined by the paradox of being unable to both remember and forget. Martinaise, much like Harry himself, grapples with a traumatic collective memory of the Antecentennial Revolution. It is incapable of recollecting its history—and equally incapable of letting go. The imagery of the hole holds a dual significance. It signifies what is missing and forgotten, but it also serves as a trace that indicates the presence of the absence, in accordance with Paul Ricoeur's definition of memory.

Third, traumatic memory arises not only from a traumatic event but also from the subsequent social process of constructing memory. While the Antecentennial Revolution was undeniably a violent episode, comprehending the traumatic memory of Revachol requires equal consideration of the four decades of financial colonization under the rule of the Coalition of Nations that ensued. The

traumatic memory that characterizes Martinaise is more aptly explained by the enduring colonial domination that followed, rather than solely the violence of the Antecentennial Revolution.

### 3.1 An amnesiac cop in an amnesiac world

Harry Du Bois, the Revachol Citizens Militia (RCM) officer we play in *Disco Elysium*, suffers from "holes in [his] brain." He does not know who he is, nor does he know anything about the world he lives in. Several characters, Harry included, are of the opinion that he "blacked out after a night of heavy drinking and lost all memory of the world." Multiple witnesses corroborate that the days preceding the blackout and hence the commencement of the game were consumed by his drinking. This is not an isolated occurrence: Harry has cultivated a long-standing habit of binge drinking. Judit Minot, a fellow RCM officer, confirms that Harry has previously undergone similar memory lapses, dispelling any belief that it is a mere pretense.

However, there are alternative interpretations for the gaps in Harry's memory. As the game nears its end, a theory emerges, proposing that Harry's memory loss could be linked to exposure to the "pale," a unique physical tissue in the universe of *Disco Elysium*. Indeed, there is a "two millimetre-hole in the world" within the Dolorian Church of Humanity. Soona, the programmer, indirectly lends support to this theory by implying that the amnesia afflicting another character, Tiago, "could be reminiscent of pale over-exposure. Time perception-related illnesses, memory malfunctions, thought insertion"—all issues that Harry also seems to share. Through Harry's enigmatic dreams within the Church, it becomes apparent that the pale assimilates individual memories, amalgamating them without clear distinction of ownership: it is "a shroud of memories and it doesn't really distinguish to whom those memories belong." *Disco Elysium* leaves the player without a definitive conclusion. To the best of our knowledge, Harry's brain holes could indeed be the result of a supernatural hole.

Harry's amnesia is undeniably motivated by extradiegetic factors. Numerous video game characters experience comparable memory loss. Several reasons account for this widespread phenomenon. An amnesiac character serves as a blank page left for the player to fill, as Harry himself acknowledges in a lucid and almost meta comment: "I lost my memory, too, but I like it. It's like I get to create a whole new me, start again from scratch." Depending on their actions and the choices made within the dialogue tree of the game, the character can evolve into a communist Super Cop or fascist Boring Cop. Additionally, amnesia plays the role of a convenient tool that positions the character in a state of ignorance paralleling that of the player, thereby legitimizing the need for NPCs to elucidate and delineate their intricate social and political world to the character, particularly in a richly complex setting like *Disco Elysium*. Last but certainly not least, amnesia makes a good story—it offers the opportunity for a quest of self-discovery. A pivotal influence for Justin Keenan, *Planescape: Torment*, released by Black Isle Studios in 1999, is wholly focused on unveiling the intricate and dark history of the Nameless One. However, unlike *Planescape: Torment*, *Disco Elysium* does not revolve around an identity quest; instead, it is a murder mystery from start to finish.[1] Despite Harry eventually uncovering some aspects of his past life and identity, these elements play a secondary role to the police investigation he conducts, albeit somewhat reluctantly.

However, Harry's amnesia is more than just a convenient gameplay device. The game prominently explores memory and oblivion, which is why other characters like the Deserter, Tiago or Idiot Doom Spiral also experience amnesia. Harry's amnesia does not merely serve as a justification for exploring Martinaise; instead, it acts as a metonym for the collective amnesia imposed upon Martinaise. Harry's memory deficiency is not primarily intended to be filled; it rather functions as a mirror reflecting the traumatic memory of the society in which he is embedded. An amnesiac cop in an amnesiac world.

Within Revachol, Martinaise stands as a district burdened by a traumatic event, referenced in the game under different names: the Antecentennial Revolution, the Turn-of-the-Century Revolution, the World Revolution, and the Civil War. Both NPCs and the Encyclopedia skills frequently make allusions to these occurrences, enabling a diligent and patient detective/player to piece together and reconstruct the timeline of events as detailed later.

Much like the Parisian Commune (Deluermoz 2020), which provided inspiration for the game developed, the Commune of Revachol is deeply entangled in the tapestry of global history. In the year '02, the inability of the Graadian regime to contain a tzaraath pandemic ignited a rebellion. Kras Mazov, an economist and the head of the Communist Party of Shest and Graad, assumed command of the insurrection and, once the regime fell, established the Graadian socialist state. The revolution in Graad initiated an international wave of protests, ultimately resulting in the creation of two foreign communes. Ignus Nilsen, Kras Mazov's most trusted lieutenant, created the Hsin-Yao Commune, extinguished in '06, before founding the People's Republic of Samara, a state that continues to exist in '51. On 7 March '02, the Décret de Mars proclaimed to the world the establishment of a third commune: Revachol.

Although it remained the capital of the world, the decline of Revachol was evident due to a succession of unskilled monarchs. Communards, whether communists or anarchists, toppled Guillaume "Le Lion." The exiled king abdicated in favor of his nephew, Frissel the First. However, the latter did not hold the crown for long, as he was killed in circumstances shrouded in uncertainty, effectively marking the triumph of the revolutionaries. As a result, the Commune of Revachol came under the governance of the Dual Commissars of the revolution, namely Julia Dobreva, an immigrant from Graad, and Jean Abadanaiz.

The three communes united their forces in opposition to the counter-revolutionary Coalition of Nations, an alliance comprising the republics of Sur-la-Clef, Messina and Oranje. Notably, the Hsin-Yao Commune provided military support to Revachol by sending Triangong 4.46 sniper rifles. The usage of matronyms in Revachol, imitating the revolutionary traditions in Graad, reveals a continuous transnational circulation of ideas and practices among the three communes during this period. After the collapse of Mazov's administration and his suicide in '08, the newly established Graadian regime allied with the Coalition, causing a shift in the balance of power. On 13 May '08, Operation Death Blow indiscriminately bombed the Commune of Revachol, marking a pivotal moment in the conflict.

Following the suicide of the Dual Commissars and the signing of the Revacholian Instrument of Surrender, the Commune of Revachol ultimately crumbled in '10. An estimated 40 million lives were lost during the eight-year revolution, and despite the bloodiest events occurring in Graad, Revachol experienced particularly brutal repression after the fall of the Commune, resulting in the extermination of communists and anarchists. In the aftermath of the revolution, Revachol was transformed into a Zone of Control, divided into twenty-one cordons under the Coalition's authority. Within this setting, the murder investigation commences—in Martinaise, a district in the northern part of Revachol, forty-one years after the fall of the Commune.

The timeline is precise, comprehensive, and meticulously written by the game designers. The Antecentennial Revolution is not some obscure event from the past; instead, it stands as a defining moment in the annals of Revachol and Martinaise. However, merely compiling its events, which will aid in navigating the rest of this chapter, misses the point. Contrary to what this may suggest, the collective memory of the Antecentennial Revolution is deficient. The murder investigation guides Harry to Iosef Lilianovich Dros, also known as the Deserter, who is possibly one of the last living communards, if not the very last. Regrettably, the Deserter's valuable testimony is clouded by his memory challenges. He too laments "holes in [his] brain:"

You: "What is La Revacholière?"
The Deserter: "It is the anthem of the World Revolution." *His eyes remain fixed on the sky.* "One of three. In Graad, they sang 'Brave Children, Favourites of History' and in Hsin-Yao it was ..." *He struggles to remember, then gives up.* "... some Samaran shit, I guess."
Encyclopedia (passive check): "In Hsin-Yao they sang 'Boy with Scythe/Golden Sun.' "
You: "How does it go—the song?"
The Deserter: "How did it go ... Something about shooting *rabbits,* I don't know ... I can't remember. It doesn't matter. It's gone now." *He waves erratically—with his hand, annoyed that he can't remember. A little tremor passes through him.*
Empathy (passive check): "It was dear to him. He resents forgetting it."
Encyclopedia (passive check): " 'So if I can shoot rabbits then I can shoot fascists too'[2]—those are the next lines."

While it is true that the player/detective can access the timeline of the revolution, its music has faded into oblivion. The central episode in the history of Martinaise consists of a collection of facts, devoid of emotional substance. Though it may appear insignificant, this detail matters greatly in a video game that places a strong emphasis on music, to the extent that its title is a reference to a musical genre. The music composed by the British band Sea Power is an integral aspect of the way the player experiences Martinaise. Our understanding of the diverse segments of Martinaise is linked to our recognition of their unique melodies—we encounter Martinaise on an aesthetic level, including through its music. The incapacity to remember La Révacholière consequently results in the impossibility of experiencing the revolution in an aesthetic and emotional manner for Harry, the inhabitants of Revachol, and the player. Because it has been silenced, the revolution remains at a distance. In this sense, what the Deserter conveys about the revolution is as significant as what he can no longer express. Despite the scholarly knowledge presented by the Encyclopedia skill or NPCs, something bodily and visceral has long since vanished from the memory of the revolution.

Much like Harry, the Deserter's amnesia can have diverse explanations. According to Kim Katsuragi, Harry's partner, it could be attributed to "old age and shock"—a statement which should perhaps be received with skepticism given that the Deserter is only fifty-nine years old. In this case too, the supernatural element might have played a part: the enduring influence of the Insulindian Phasmid probably likely contributed to this memory loss. In a more prosaic sense, the Deserter's amnesia could be connected to the collective amnesia imposed on Martinaise. Individual memories are intertwined with group memory (Halbwachs 1938). Memories are rekindled, and occasionally even forged, during social interactions with individuals who also hold these memories. The Deserter, who fled the community of Martinaise after deserting the Communards, has been cut off from society and consequently from collective memory. Individual memories, no less than collective ones, are social products.

The brutal repression which befell the Revachol Commune provides an additional explanation for the Deserter's solitary memory. History, the institutionalization of collective memory, is often penned by the victorious, given the convenient silence of the dead. As observed by Joyce Messier, perhaps not without a hint of satisfaction, the massacre of the Communards disrupted the chain of testimonial transmission and prevented the construction of collective memory:

You: "Who got shot in the head?"
Joyce Messier: "Those would be the communists. Generally speaking, 40 million people got shot in the head during the World Revolution. But the communists—they *all* got shot in the head. Oh, and the anarchists too! They shot them well. So well one forgets they even existed."
Joyce Messier: "They piled them in mass graves in Ozonne and, well—that's the last anyone heard of those people."

The brain holes may not solely result from supernatural causes. Both Communards and, by extension, the Martinaise community bear these brain holes because they were shot in the head. This metaphorical image of the hole alludes to a social explanation for both collective and individual amnesia, with collective memory loss being a product of repressive violence.

Direct witnesses to the Antecentennial Revolution are a scarce find,[3] and even scarcer are those who are willing to converse about their experiences of the event. The majority, such as Joyce Messier, who was a child at the time, seldom bring up their personal recollections. Moreover, historical knowledge appears to be rare in Martinaise. Upon mentioning the Hsin-Yao Commune, the Encyclopedia skill comments that "almost no one remembers there was a third metastasis of the World Revolution, in the Safre Empire, extinguished in '06." Likewise, when Call me Mañana mentions Dobreva and Abadanaiz, hardly obscure historical figures since they led the Revachol Commune, the Encyclopedia skill reacts: "Wow, this one's a deep cut." Not everyone recalls the Antecentennial Revolution—not even the player, if they happen to fail an Encyclopedia skill test or choose a different dialogue option.

Hence, it is not a mere coincidence that the two characters who offer the most insights about the Revolution, namely Joyce Messier and Steban, hold privileged social positions. Joyce Messier serves as the representative of the Wild Pines Group, a centuries-old company that provides employment for over 72,000 families. The *Cor-de-Leite '19*, the ship she sails, stands as a symbol of her wealth and authority. Steban, on the other hand, is a student enrolled in cultural studies at the École Normale de Revachol. While Steban's living quarters may not be opulent, his social and cultural capital is exceptional in comparison to the workers and outcasts residing in Martinaise. Being well-informed about the revolution and having the rightful authority to engage in discussions about it function as demonstrations of social power.

Apart from dialogues with NPCs, a substantial amount of historical information can be gleaned from the Encyclopedia skill throughout the game—or so it seems. One of the remarkable and nearly unparalleled aspects of *Disco Elysium* is the fact that successful skill checks do not consistently yield positive outcomes. To the contrary, successful attempts frequently have the opposite effect by misguiding the player, undermining relations with NPCs, and worsening their situation. Granted, there is no evidence to imply that

the Encyclopedia skill, specifically, may deceive us—but considering that the player depends on this skill to validate historical claims, would we be able to tell anyway?

Moreover, the gameplay downplays the significance of historical knowledge and instead emphasizes what could be termed historical *intuition*. Certain actions, when combined, may lead to the articulation of a "thought" that, if embraced by the player, results in a range of benefits and drawbacks. One of these thoughts is "The Suicide of Kras Mazov." The detective/player can conclude that "it's clearly a lie ... Mazov didn't shoot himself... . He was either assassinated or died in the bombing. You might even have evidence to support this somewhere in your brain." There is no evidence within the game to corroborate this intuition, and Harry fails to provide a rationale for or substantiate this revelation. In *Disco Elysium*, history is not solely concerned with truth; it is also, and perhaps more than anything else, about political allegiances and guts.

Players are immersed in a complex and densely woven historical backdrop. During the game, the player's understanding of the Antecentennial Revolution is systematically questioned. Historical information and collective memory are the unstable conquest of a demented witness and an unreliable encyclopedic knowledge over the oblivion orchestrated by the most brutal repressive violence and the slow erosion of time. While *Disco Elysium* emphasizes the significance of collective memory, it also illustrates its essential vulnerability.

### 3.2 Haunted memories

The collective memory of the Antecentennial Revolution is incomplete and mutilated. Paradoxically, it is also persistent. Traumatic memory is caught between oblivion and memory (Bell 2006). As mentioned before, Harry's amnesia does not turn into an identity quest. The game remains focused on the murder investigation. This has less to do with Harry's professional commitment and more to do with his unwillingness to confront his past. In *Disco Elysium*, recollection is not merely a daunting task: it is a painful endeavor. Harry's damaged ledger holds a treasure trove of information about his past, particularly his prior investigations. A thorough examination of the item reveals a letter written by Dora Ingerlund, Harry's former fiancée:

Damaged ledger: "Harry," *it begins—you're already reading.* "I wanted to write you a letter, so you can read it when you wake up. Maybe it will make you happy."
Volition (passive check): "Throw it away. Please."
You: "But it will make me *happy* ..."
Damaged ledger: "A merciful wind blows in from the Bay of Revachol, dusting the ground at your feet and raising newspapers far away. You feel the card slipping into it ..."
Shivers (passive check): "LET GO."
You: Throw the card in the wind.
Damaged ledger: Just like that the wind picks it from your fingers. Cold, they let go, the wax paper rustles, a whisper light and low ... Then a sudden gust raises the postcard to the drizzle grey sky above. Away from you ...
Shivers (passive check): "A small piece of paper dances above Martinaise—above slow waves crashing the shore; and the war torn houses and the new *batiments nouveau* alike ... For your own sake—forget about it."
Electrochemistry (passive check): "Synapses can be rerouted. The mind takes a new shape."
Volition (passive check): "Not for yourself—for the people of Revachol."

Harry's amnesia is incomplete. True, the detective recollects only bits of his past, or at least feigns it, but his volition alerts him that this letter poses a threat to Harry's unstable equilibrium between memory and oblivion. Should players with a nosy disposition persist in reading the letter, it appears that Harry's volition was accurate. The pain of remembering is nearly lethal in intensity. Buried deep within the layers of Harry Du Bois's consciousness, a fragment of his past memory endures, enough to alert the player that recalling could be deadly. Harry's dedication to solving the murder mystery is intentional; he consciously avoids the expected quest for identity, using the investigation as a diversion while only accidentally uncovering glimpses of his history.

Considering the pain of remembering, it is important to recognize that forgetting is not a mere absence of memory. Friedrich Nietzsche famously questioned the negative definition of oblivion as a dysfunction of memory and, instead, presented amnesia as an active and necessary capacity (Nietzsche 2007, 35):

> Forgetfulness is not just a *vis inertiae*, as superficial people believe, but is rather an active ability to suppress, positive in the strongest sense of the word, to which we owe the fact that what we simply live through, experience, take in, no more enters our consciousness during digestion (one could call it spiritual ingestion) than does the thousand-fold process which takes place with our physical consumption of food, our so-called ingestion ... there could be no happiness, cheerfulness, hope, pride, *immediacy*, without forgetfulness.

The Deserter aptly exemplifies Nietzsche's concept of the "bad conscience" instilled by "guilt" (*Schuld*). His tragic condition does not result from memory insufficiency but rather from an excess of it. Following forty-three years and ten months of hiding in and around Martinaise, the Deserter recognizes:

The Deserter: "It's inhuman. It's sick. It's not how a human being should live but I had to... . I couldn't just forget. I couldn't just forget what I saw."
Empathy (passive check): "He does not want to see life moving on. People forgetting. Drinking. Laughing."

The repression was deeply traumatic, resulting in a lack of forgetfulness which has impeded the Deserter's ability to move on. It is not the Deserter's madness that hinders his recollection, but his inability to forget that has driven him to madness.

Among the NPCs, the Deserter's approach to the past is just one of several situations. Take Cuno, a violent and foul-mouthed teenager, who outwardly pretends to be "all about being in the moment" and, as a result, is unburdened by the past:

Cuno: "Listen—listen, Cuno's just big like that. Doesn't need that bitch-ass melodrama. Cuno fires and forgets. Cuno forgives and moves on."

Cuno provides us with an opposing model. Unlike the Deserter, he affirms that he possesses the ability to forgive and progress. Yet, is Cuno akin to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, capable of forgetting? This is far from certain: Cuno often weaves tales about himself—perhaps even deceiving himself. His outward toughness conceals his isolation. In *Disco Elysium*, both remembering and forgetting are equally formidable endeavors.

Harry's volition impelled him to forget, "not for [himself]—for the people of Revachol." The prose of *Disco Elysium* is often as twisted as Harry's own thoughts. As a consequence, this statement becomes enigmatic: would it be better for Revachol that Harry forgets, or would it be better for Revachol itself to forget? The frequent parallels drawn between Harry's past and the collective trauma endured by Revachol support the latter interpretation. Just as in Harry's case, the collective memory loss remains partial. The traumatic memory denies the comfort of pure oblivion, leaving the memory of Revachol in a painful limbo between recollection and forgetfulness—unable to both remember and forget.

Even forgotten, the Antecentennial Revolution exerts a presence. The skill Shivers allows the detective/player to "tune into the city": "Shivers come when the temperature drops and you become more keenly aware of your surroundings. It enables you to hear the city itself, to truly belong to the streets." The moment Harry sets foot on the balcony of the Whirling-in-Rags, he can *feel* the city:

Shivers (passive check): "To be in Martinaise, where no one goes. At the run-off point of a long-forgotten canal, in the whitest part of town. In the shadow of the day the Revolution failed."

Martinaise, severely ravaged by bombings due to the Antecentennial Revolution, has faded into obscurity. The brutal repression endured during and after the Revolution also impeded the ability of Martinaise to erase those memories.

Martinaise bears marks from the Antecentennial Revolution. In his work *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur regards traces as the conditions for memory (Ricœur 2004). The philosopher makes a distinction between two trace categories. Mnestic traces are imprints within the brain, whereas the written traces or archives serve historians in piecing together the memory of past events. These two categories complement each other, as written traces often consist of accounts from individuals of the past who retained memories engraved in their own minds. In both instances, the trace is described as the present manifestation and indication of its vanished source. The trace is the tangible presence upon which memory depends.

In *Disco Elysium*, the marks left behind are rarely recorded in written form. Exploring the basement in the commercial area, for instance, reveals the presence of an arm cache. Kim clarifies that this is not an exceptional occurrence, as there are "lots of forgotten war-time weapons lying around here." Nonetheless, the broken and dust-covered Belle-Magrave BM446, a rifle once used by the Communards, stands as a symbol of the lasting, albeit concealed, presence of the Revolution in the city. A dusty picture of Kras Mazov found in the bunker is also a trace of the communards' activities prior to their disappearance.

However, the most noticeable vestiges of the Antecentennial Revolution within the cityscape of Martinaise bears a more macabre dimension: "Martinaise is riddled with bullet holes." The intensity of the Civil War, notably the invasion and the repressive measures executed by the Coalition of Nations, has left its mark on the old edifices of Martinaise. The metaphorical image of the hole undergoes an inversion: while the holes in the brain symbolize the oblivion, the bullet holes in the walls of Martinaise serve as a testament to its equally traumatic inability to forget.

In Westcoast, bullet holes can hardly be missed as it only requires an easy Perception check to notice them. Through the utilization of his professional skills (with a successful Visual Calculus check), Harry can reconstruct the mass execution that took place, summoning the specters of the revolution:

Visual calculus: "A row of ghostly shades facing a crumbling wall, with another seven shades standing ten metres from them. A single person stands on the sideline."
You: "Who was who in this execution? I need to understand."
Kim Kitsuragi: *At first the lieutenant doesn't say a word... . He just stares at the wall.* "I don't know", *he says finally.* "I don't know who died here, lined up beside that horrible wall. It could have been any of the parties involved in the Revolution. Perhaps the ones executed here were the loyalist-conservatives killed by the communists at the start of the civil war. Or it could have been the communists, put to death during the last stretch of the conflict by the Coalition forces."

A specter haunts Martinaise, the specter of the Commune! The ghosts of the Revolution are embedded within the surroundings of the city, ready to loom for those who can interpret the traces. The Antecentennial Revolution is not an event relegated to distant memory; it remains ever present.

### 3.3 Traumatic memory in an anomic world

Martinaise is unable both to remember and to forget. The Antecentennial Revolution has left gruesome traces. However, traumatic memory is not merely a consequence of the impression imposed by the past upon a community; it is also the outcome of how this community has engaged with this imprint. As argued by Abdelmajid Hannoum,

> forgetting is neither a dysfunction of memory, nor an absence of recollection, it is a way to reorganize memory. I further maintain such reorganizing of memory is neither accidental nor innocent, but it is a way to define the political present, to give meaning to specific events, to control their contingencies.
>
> (Hannoum 2019, 369)

Collective memory is constructed and sustained through social processes, with these processes often carrying power relations.

The Antecentennial Revolution is the pivotal event in the historical narrative of Martinaise, serving as the cornerstone of its traumatic collective memory. By contrast, we have scant information about the four decades that followed, precisely the period

during which the collective memory of this event was molded and transmitted. The traumatic memory of the revolution cannot be solely attributed to the violent nature of this episode. While it was undoubtedly brutal, pitiless and bloody, the four decades that followed are equally responsible for the trauma inflicted on Martinaise.

After the Civil War, Revachol was converted into a Zone of Control under the rule of the Coalition. The city, once a colonial power with authority over the Empire of Safre and the Iilmaraa, was effectively subjected to colonization. Joyce Messier, an agent of the Coalition, anticipates Harry's potential objections regarding her political beliefs:

> Joyce Messier: "I pushed the king under a *shitwagon* and betrayed the Revolution. My kind surrendered the nation to financial colonists ..."

Although she was born during the Commune and as such had relatively little personal accountability for the events of that era, Joyce Messier represents the ultraliberals who spearheaded the Coalition of Nations. The financial colonization of Revachol paved the way for fresh investments in the city. Notably, the Greater Revachol Industrial Harbour, a subsidiary of the centuries-old Wild Pines Group that employs 72,000 families, seized this opportunity to gain control of the port in Martinaise.

In our reality, colonization often went hand in hand with the formulation of historical narratives enforced upon the people living under colonial rule, all in the name of justifying that rule (Hannoum 2019). Collective memory was instrumental in the unequal power dynamic. Educational institutions notably acted as influential tools in creating and preserving historical narratives that shaped the memory and identity of the colonized populations, as seen in the cases of the French in Algeria or the British in India. When they successfully established official collective memories, colonial powers gained the ability to influence the regimes of forgetting and remembrance, both in their home countries and in the colonized territories.

*Disco Elysium* portrays a distinct yet equally intricate scenario. The district was never fully dominated by the ultraliberal factions supported by the Coalition, primarily due to the mobilization of the Dockworkers' Union, also known as the Débardeurs' Union, led by Evrart Claire. This grassroots opposition possessed sufficient power to obstruct corporate endeavors aimed at renovating the buildings of the district. The Commercial area, deemed cursed by some and condemned by unrelenting capitalist ideology for others, exemplifies the failure of economic activities in Martinaise.

The phrasing used by Joyce Messier holds significance: the Coalition paved the way for *financial* colonialists. The colonization of Martinaise has largely been confined to the financial sector. The extent of control over other institutions remains uncertain. The player does not know much about the rest of the institutions in Martinaise and more broadly in Revachol. To the best of our knowledge, there is no city hall, post office or school in Martinaise. Only two institutions are brought to our attention. The first of these, the École Normale of Revachol, is a university about which we have limited information. Even though Steban expresses frustration over the absence of critical education in seminars and lectures, he does not mention any endeavors to construct a colonial historical narrative there—or any historical narrative for that matter.

The second institution is the RCM that serves as the police force in Revachol and about which collective memory is notably absent. Kim observes, "[I]t's a point of contention whether the citizens of Revachol or the Coalition Government founded the RCM." While it is uncertain to what degree the RCM is under the control of the Coalition and the ultraliberals, it is plagued by significant structural deficiencies. Harry places blame on it, describing it as being "chronically mismanaged, deeply corrupt, and completely outmatched." Although it is reasonable to approach Harry's assessments with skepticism, his acrimonious comments find support in the fact that, as Kim explains, the RCM depends on donations, including those from major corporations like the Wild Pines Group. However, it is not entirely evident how much control the Coalition exercises over Martinaise as a whole through the RCM. The authority of the latter is notoriously limited and compromised. On the first day of his investigation, a Mysterious Pair of Eyes greets Harry with this caution: "the eyes of Martinaise are upon you, piggy!" The anti-police insult is frequently employed by NPCs such as Cuno, Cunoesse and Cindy the Skull. Granted, the RCM is deeply tainted by colonial and capitalist influences. However, perhaps in part due to this, its authority is questioned and precarious.

In spite of their endeavors, the inability of the Coalition and big corporations to exert control over Martinaise is the reason the traumatic legacy of the Antecentennial Revolution remains imprinted on the façade of the city, making it an enduring aspect of collective memory. René Arnoux, a loyalist veteran who bemoans the fact that "the rest of the city got cleaned up, but Martinaise they keep as a 'monument,' " is mistaken. The architectural decay in Martinaise does not stem from the intentions of financial colonists but rather from conflicts between competing powers. Martinaise is no monument because it is a conflictual space. More radically, Martinaise *has* no monument. Monuments, such as public statues, are utilized by local and national authorities to demonstrate their authority and prestige (Hargrove 1997, 1855–86). Monuments are an institutional representation of history, where official memory is immortalized in stone and marble.

*Disco Elysium* explicitly emphasizes the significance of monuments in constructing official memory. In *Suzerainty*, a board game that Harry can engage in with Kim, the rules state that "erecting monuments in Revachol gives you a multiplier of 5x." Monuments symbolize suzerainty and set the official regime of remembrance and, consequently, the official regime of forgetting. The monarchs of Revachol diligently followed similar rules, long before the Antecentennial Revolution. Take, for instance, Filippe III, also known as "the most wasteful ruler of Revachol," who erected a staggering 140 statues of himself in the capital. Through monuments, the official memory of the community is solidified by its authority.

However, I argue that Martinaise does not possess an official memory—and, thus, monuments. This might seem paradoxical, given that the monumental sculpture in the roundabout is arguably the most recognizable image in the video game. The horseback statue of Filippe III, a relic of the king's extravagant projects, was once a monument celebrating the glory of the Monarchy—but that is no longer the case. The monument was indeed "blown apart by communards and then further damaged during the landing of the Coalition's airships," and the royal remains exhumed and thrown into the ocean.[4] A few years prior to the diegesis, the statue was partially restored to capture seize "the moment it was blown apart like *an instant frozen in time*. A rare butterfly, trapped in amber, floating on a sea of ... shit." The horseback statue is no longer a monument to the monarchy. René Arnoux, another character obsessed with the question of memory, laments the collective forgetting of the monarchist past of Revachol:

René Arnoux: "The Suzerain is the King. Has everyone forgotten already?" *He then slowly nods and says to himself:* "They've forgotten already."

The Antecentennial Revolution marked the definitive end of the monarchical history of Martinaise, and this transition appears to evoke little nostalgia in the local populace. Representing the time when the statue was taken down changed the initial symbolism. It no longer represents royal power—Harry may even persuade the Deserter that the statue has become a communist monument.

However, the horseback statue is not a communist monument either. According to the Encyclopedia skill, "some years ago a group of liberal, artistically inclined individuals (designers mostly) thought it would be *ironic* to restore the statue of the most wasteful ruler of Revachol in the poorest part of the city." The statue embodies the history of Martinaise as we understand it: the Monarchy (the statue of Filippe III), the Commune (blown apart by the Communards), and the Zone of Control (restored by designers and imposed on Martinaise). It may even reflect Harry's investigation, depending on his "copotype" (Superstar Cop, Apocalypse Cop, Sorry Cop, Boring Cop, Honour Cop, Art Cop). The horseback statue mirrors the city as much as it mirrors the specific version of Harry that has been forged by the player's decisions and actions.

Hence, the horseback statue is *not* a monument. There is no institutional purpose behind it; it does not commemorate the Monarchy, the Commune or even the ensuing counter-revolution and its colonial consequences. Instead, it exists as a pedantic joke that deflects the collective memory and history of Martinaise. Capitalism possesses a remarkable capacity for digestion. Harry recognizes the name of la Révacholière, a revolutionary anthem, because "they named a fucking perfume after it." The fact that colonial forces did not create and enforce their own historical narrative does not necessarily mean that they failed to do so. Possibly, capitalism developed another relationship to the past: just like anything else, the traumatic collective memory of Martinaise became a business opportunity.

As a result, the traumatic collective memory of the Antecentennial Revolution has not been institutionalized after the counter-revolution. Emma Hutchison examines the contradictory consequences of traumatic episodes, as they can both isolate individuals and stimulate a sense of belonging, creating what she calls an "affective community" (Hutchison 2016). In the absence of any political authority or spontaneous endeavors to change the material situation of the city and establish an official memory, the trauma resulting from the Antecentennial Revolution has further divided the community of Martinaise. Even forty-one years later, the Civil War continues to be a polarizing issue in the city. The very terms used to refer to the Revolution and its key figures vary significantly; for instance, some call Ignus Nilsen "the Evangelist of the Revolution," while others know him as "the Apocalyptic Shrike." The memory of the Revolution is characterized by its holes but remains present and contentious.

The developers of *Disco Elysium* openly acknowledge their leftist influences. However, the game does not shy away from critiquing leftist ideologies and frequently highlights ideological tensions. When examining the traumatic memory of the Antecentennial Revolution, it becomes apparent that a political paradox emerges. It is unclear whether Martinaise remains trapped in its traumatic past due to colonization or due to an incomplete colonization impeded by the Union's resistance—that is, a state of anomie. What is evident, however, is that the absence of any institutional authority has hindered the development of a unifying historical narrative for the Martinaise community. No institutional power has succeeded in dispelling the specter that continues to haunt Martinaise—and perhaps no institutional power has even attempted to do so.

## 3.4 Conclusion

Memory is inherently social and thus political. Through discussions with the inhabitants and the exploration of its environment, Harry progressively brings out the traumatic past of the Antecentennial Revolution in Martinaise. Like Harry, Martinaise suffers from brain holes: the Revolution and the repression that followed have been partially forgotten and the chain of testimonial transmission broken by the execution of most communards. Collective memory, in *Disco Elysium*, is both incomplete and unforgettable. The specter of the Commune is still haunting the walls of the city, riddled with bullet holes.

The Antecentennial Revolution, also called the Civil War, was a shocking historical episode during which both sides used the most extreme violence toward their political opponents. Traumatic historical episodes alone are, however, insufficient to explain the construction of traumatic memory. Collective memory is indeed created, shaped and institutionalized by political authorities. The situation of Martinaise in that regard is complex. Even though the Coalition has financially colonized Revachol, it has only a limited control on Martinaise due to the resistance of the Union. The anomy that results leaves little institutional power capable to shape collective memory. Martinaise is stuck in its past because the community has not created a collective narrative that would unify and strengthen the group. The past, on the contrary, is cynically diverted and appropriated by the capitalists of the Coalition.

The traumatic memory suffered by Martinaise is structural. It says as much about the violence of the Antecentennial Revolution and the repression that followed, central to the characters' narratives, as about the misery produced by the current colonial dominion, on which we know little. Both what is said and what is silenced shed a gloomy light on what is forgotten and what is remembered.

## Notes

1. Noah Caldwell-Gervais, "Judicial Opinions: What Makes Disco Elysium a Modern Classic?" Last accessed January 23, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_7ngJDbUQE&ab_channel=NoahCaldwell-Gervais. ⏎
2. This line is probably a quote from the song "If You Tolerate This Your Children Will be Next" by Manic Street Preachers (1998), the latter being attributed to a Republican fighter in the Spanish Civil War. ⏎
3. Beyond the Deserter, René Arnoux and Gaston Martin also fought during this period—yet on the other side. ⏎
4. The question of the contested historical heritage has been central in post-Soviet countries, including Estonia in which *Disco Elysium* was created. Statues, in particular, have played an important role in these debates (Frigerio 2019; McClymont 2021). Furthermore, the importance of memory in the constitution of urbanization has been recently underlined by transnational social movements (for a general outlook, see McClymont 2021), such as the Black Lives Matter wave in 2020 that gave a second wind to the Rhodes Must Fall demands. ⏎

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# 4 "Thought Cabinet"

## Imagining ludic alternatives to capitalist realism

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### Introduction: ludic solutions to narrative impasses

Early in the game, as the player talks to Cuno, the street urchin who has been hanging out near the crime scene, the phrase "Don't I have a single normal thing to say?" appears as one of the dialogue options. In many ways, this line is a perfect distillation of the ethos of *Disco Elysium*, a game where the player finds themselves constantly invited to experiment with their own thoughts. This chapter accordingly explores *Disco Elysium*'s intricate role in the relationship between everyday life and video games, informing one another in terms of how everyone negotiates with and conforms to a capitalistic reality. The mission-oriented design of mainstream games mirrors the rationality imposed by financial logic; that is, survival requires taking a prestructured path to accomplish a task—and this is the measurement of one's *existential value*. In this sense, video games and their use of inventory management mechanisms amplify the cycles of desire/entertainment and work/exploitation that are inherent to capitalism. However, there are possibilities for ludic subversions, allowing the player to experiment beyond the conventional utilization of inventory management mechanism.

With a blend of narrative and ludic elements, *Disco Elysium* captures the impasse of political and cultural production expressed by Mark Fisher's (2009) category of capitalist realism: that is, capitalism as the horizon of what is possible, the only game in town (8). Through its unique mechanism of Thought Cabinet, where players pick thoughts for their character, the game also provides a personalized experience. In the game's fictional world after a failed revolution, the purpose of Thought Cabinet is to acquire and develop thoughts by interacting with the world in particular ways, which, in turn, forms a new subjectivity for the player in the game world. These thoughts influence the way the players engage with game mechanisms by giving them various perks or disadvantages, but nothing in the story-skeleton changes fundamentally by these actions. In this sense, the game transforms the inventory management mechanism from its conventional use of promoting economic

functionality and efficiency to constructing and experiencing relatively liberated subjectivities. In this way, the game leads the player to a deliberative creation of moments where play becomes a constant part of the everyday banality of the game world.

Reworking a mechanism of inventory management into a *play* in and of itself—in the sense Johan Huizinga (1980) uses the term in *Homo Ludens*—foregrounds experimentation as opposed to the utilitarian understanding of conventional inventory management. Thus, what *Disco Elysium* shows through this ludic mechanism within a static narrative is that if player agency/choice seems like an illusion in a world without an alternative, the point is the interaction itself. Echoing Lazzarato's critical study on debt to grasp the subjectification process of the contemporary economy, this chapter argues that *Disco Elysium* compels the player to embrace their "lateral agency," to use Lauren Berlant's (2011) term from *Cruel Optimism*. This intervention complicates the concept of capitalist realism since the game proposes that the issue is not simply the supposedly insurmountable reality of capitalism but the way subjects relate and interact with this reality. In other words, by reworking a conventional inventory management mechanism for Thought Cabinet, *Disco Elysium* shows that ludic subversions are possible in dealing with the political and cultural stasis diagnosed by Fisher.

## 4.1 Playing to be a realist

### *Inventory management as a training*

Resource and inventory management mechanisms in video games rely on a capitalist understanding of efficiency and scarcity, which reinforces the idea that capitalist logic is not only realistic but also *natural*. Since video games usually feature a mission-based structure that imposes on the player the completion of a specific set of tasks in predetermined ways, they also promote a certain type of *rationality* in line with the game's design and mechanisms. In this sense, such games demand the player to be aware of the manufactured scarcity of resources and act accordingly in managing their inventory for accomplishing missions. Regardless of the genre, most solutions to a given problem in a game are already built in by the production team. For instance, in strategy games like *Frostpunk* (2018), where the player manages a community after an apocalyptic event, and *Cities: Skylines* (2015), which is a city-building game that gives the player the powers of a "super-mayor," games push players to make specific choices about the social fabric of the game world that they manage while the population of their virtual cities grows (such as prioritizing productivity and efficiency to the detriment of the population or cutting services to certain regions of the game world). While these games do not address the intricate nature of political decision-making, their mechanisms work to rationalize technocratic understanding of *the real world* in the way they rely on utilitarian perspectives. Admittedly, these games are not the same genre as *Disco Elysium*. However, narrative-based adventure role-playing games, that is, the games

that are similar to *Disco*, tend to be more restrictive in this regard since such games progress by leading the player down to certain paths even when they do not feature hand-holding mechanisms.

How one must manage and allocate resources in a given game works to internalize the capitalist rationality relying on the interplay of scarcity and survival. In *Biopolitical Screens*, Väliaho (2014) argues that, in the visual economy, an understanding of calculation and speculation is critical to the capitalist subjectivity, which he names the "neoliberal brain" (2014, 20). The unique way in which video games perpetuate such subjectivity, compared to other forms of media, could be best seen through Bogost's *Persuasive Games* (2007). His understanding of video games through "procedural rhetoric" shows how video games provide tools to make a convincing argument. With a reference to Jane Murray, Bogost defines "procedural" as the primary capability of computers to perform a set of actions according to the rules laid out by an algorithm, and thus "creat[ing] meaning through the interaction of algorithms" (2007, 3). In Bogost's understanding, *procedurality* is how representation operates in video games (2007, 5). What is different about "procedural representation" is that it is not descriptive; it "explains processes *with other processes*" (2007, 9). As such, Bogost emphasizes video games' persuasive capabilities: "Procedural rhetoric is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models" (2007, 29). In other words, performing tasks in video games conditions the player's behavior beyond the game world as well.

In tracking "military technoscientific legacy" in video games in *Gameplay Mode*, Crogan (2011) makes a similar argument about video games' capability of "training" the player or conditioning their behavior in specific ways (xiii). As first-person shooter (FPS) games capture the speed of information in contemporary technoculture, he turns to FPS games in *Gameplay Mode*:

> Playing is training—training for the performances that overcome particular game challenges within one level, stage, or mission, and ultimately for the performance that one day will end the game. Of course, a game may still be fun even after this performance is achieved, such may be the variety of possible successful performances and eventualities in the fullness of its ergodic temporality. Nonetheless, the essence of the mechanism is this problem-solving dynamic of modeling solutions via experimental repetition of the challenging scenario.
>
> (Crogan 2011, 98)

While Crogan's argument concerns the connections between military technologies and how video games perpetuate—or sometimes complicate—widespread military logic exploiting or constructing security concerns, it also reveals how *playing* doubles as *training* in a deeper sense—not only in FPS games where one is habituated to combat footage but also through mechanisms like inventory management as one

internalizes financial logic of speculation and risk while managing their inventory. For instance, like many other RPGs utilizing inventory management, in *Wasteland 3* (2020), the player must make informed decisions about how to approach the next combat and acquire the necessary means for their inventory to accomplish their objective. This kind of informed decision-making occurs not only in terms of inventory management but also in the player's selection of side missions. In this sense, the game imposes a kind of financial logic where the player approaches the game world based on material benefits in their mission to *conquer* it. Such a game design inevitably relies on notions of speculation and risk since the player must calculate every step they take by accounting for rewards. Thus, the game reproduces the predominant logic of exchange and value—rather than encouraging players to reflect on such a logic. Such a line of argumentation, however, is not to condemn video games at large or a mechanism of inventory management. As Milburn (2018) argues in *Respawn*, while video games "provide a grammar, a vocabulary, a regimen for dealing with rapid technoscientific change and its worldly ramifications," they also provide a playful way of dealing with the said ramifications and imagining alternatives (2018, 22). Although the common utilization of inventory management and widespread reliance on mission-oriented narratives bespeak the diagnosis of Fisher's capitalist realism—that is, the horizon of imagination is bounded by capitalism—this chapter's core argument about *Disco Elysium* shows how ludic mechanisms could work in different ways. At this point, a brief exploration of capitalist realism is pertinent.

### *What is capitalist realism?*

With reference to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, "Capitalist Realism" is defined by Fisher (2009) as capitalism enclosing the horizons of what is possible. In other words, it refers to the commonplace perception that "capitalism [is] the only viable political and economic system" (2009, 2), which is more commonly expressed as: "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (2009, 1). In this sense, Fisher argues that capitalism is seen as *the* only reality rather than one of the possible *realities* and that the current era is defined by this impasse. Hence, the concept of capitalist realism refers us to a twofold structure: on the one hand, understanding *late capitalism* and, on the other, narratives of its *cultural logic* in the sense Jameson's seminal work *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* articulates (2005). As Fisher conceptualizes capitalist realism by analyzing various media—in addition to everyday experiences—he diagnoses that political stasis is a reflection of the impasse of cultural imagination.

Drawing from various theorists, including Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Alain Badiou, David Harvey and Jameson, Fisher's understanding presumes that capitalism is a totalizing system since he posits that capitalist realism establishes an understanding of "business ontology," where "everything in society, including healthcare to education, should be run as a business" (Fisher 2009, 17). Considering the primary economic imperative of running a business, Fisher emphasizes the profit motive ingrained in capitalism without explicating in detail how that motive

operates. His vagueness on the economic processes, however, is not necessarily an oversight. As a public intellectual, Fisher's work is mostly concerned with the ways in which theory and everyday life intersect: His articulation of capitalist realism revolves around the accounts of increasing bureaucracy in performance evaluations of education workers and the political reasons for common mental health problems like depression and anxiety (20). As such, Fisher's work suggests that radical theory is not simply an understanding of *the way things are* but the first step of challenging them. In this sense, any understanding of capitalism should account for the primarily adaptive nature of capitalism, which gradually transforms its form to counter and then absorb anti-capitalist grievances. Thus, with a reference to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, Fisher states that capitalism is "the abomination" that defies any established societal code: "The limits of capitalism are not fixed by fiat but defined (and re-defined) pragmatically and improvisationally" (6).

As a heuristic device, capitalist realism can be situated in different registers: as a periodization where it updates the political conceptualization of postmodernism and neoliberalism (Shonkwiler and La Berge 2014, 5); as a category of literary/aesthetic critique (where it is used as a tool for critical analysis); and as a commonplace ideological subjectivity and as such a weapon of closure (where it refers to capitalism's capability to subsume its opponents and anti-capitalist critique while also addressing left melancholia).[1] Diagnosing the pervading state of despair in late capitalism, the designation of capitalist realism provides fertile ground for cultural and political criticism. As an attempt at periodization, it confirms Jameson's (2005, 17) observations and argument about postmodernism, claiming that the contemporary era is marked by the prevalence of pastiche, and suggests that the contradictions entailed by the category of postmodernism are amplified to a degree requiring a new theorization. The cultural impasse implicated by the seemingly endless loop of staging and rehashing previous aesthetic styles reflects the political deadlock in which capitalism has enclosed the horizons of the imagination, barring any meaningful contestation of the status quo. Similarly, as a category of cultural criticism, capitalist realism not only identifies the ideological formation of cultural texts but also accounts for the political and actual violence of the late capitalist culture. For instance, Fisher argues that widespread mental health issues such as depression among the youth are not isolated incidents but another sociopolitical problem caused by capitalism (2009, 21). In this sense, the concept of capitalist realism helps recognize the psychosocial dimension of the present and shows that cultural criticism is crucial for grasping the prevalent anxieties of contemporary times.

Here, Shonkwiler and La Berge's (2014) introductory chapter in *Reading Capitalist Realism* is pivotal as they posit that capitalist realism has a double usage: It not only captures the "ideological closure and defeat" but "also operate[s] theoretically and critically to describe the relationship between accumulation and representation in the present" (2014, 7). In this sense, as Shonkwiler and La Berge argue, capitalist realism accounts for the totalizing aspect of capitalism by addressing how the profit

motive conditions one's conduct in everyday life and "interpellates" them: "The effectiveness of the concept is that it emphasizes the economic while insisting at the same time on the political and representational dimensions of capitalism" (7). Following Shonkwiler and La Berge, this chapter considers capitalist realism both as an identification of and an intervention into the contemporary capitalist ideological formation. This is also apparent in the famous maxim, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (Fisher 2009, 1), as the political despair of being confined to a capitalist mode (the seeming feasibility of the end of the world versus that of capitalism) is linked to the challenge of *imagining*. Consequently, when imagination fails, despair emerges since it seems as if capitalist reality completely captures the known limits of everyday life and there is no means to overcome that reality. As such, by emphasizing the lack of a coherent alternative to capitalism, capitalist realism helps to problematize the inertial melancholia of the Left and moves the focus to the ways in which economic relations shape subjectivities under late capitalism. In other words, by revealing the political despair disguised as realism in the transpersonal psychosphere, capitalist realism shows that while capitalism is the source of common anxieties, the prevalent feeling of despair is the source on which capitalism feeds. This is the most important aspect of capitalist realism since it attempts to politicize and collectivize the notion of despair, and it is precisely this very attempt that carries the potential for further political mobilization. While critical analyses of capitalism tend to emphasize economic categories such as surplus labor and the falling rate of profit in basing their critique, the ways in which capital shapes subjectivity, and thus one's role in perpetuating the capitalist form, are as crucial as an economic analysis for a critical understanding of capitalism. As Fisher argues, "To reclaim a real political agency means first of all accepting our insertion *at the level of desire* in the remorseless meat-grinder of Capital" (2009, 15).

*Disco Elysium*, like any cultural artifact of its time, captures this impasse expressed by the concept of capitalist realism. In the game's fictional world, despair and stasis emerge as the dominant affective registers. The game takes place after a failed revolution where a country not only is unable to rebuild itself, but its residents have given up hoping for any kind of change. The people of Revachol seem to have accepted that nothing will get any better. So much so that there is even a dialogue between the player and Kim Kitsuragi, the player-character's partner, suggesting that the reason these two detectives have been sent to solve this case was the expectation that they will not succeed. The game suggests that the main plot of the murder mystery revolves around the presumption of failure. Even the corrupted labor union, one of the political power groups in Revachol, fails at every turn in their effort to cover up their ties to the murder. In this sense, the corrupted labor union operates more like an ineffective group of muscles as the ideal of a flourishing community is not only inaccessible but unimaginable. Thus, failure emerges as the game's inescapable reality. By the same token, the game emphasizes the defeat of revolutionary ideas at every turn. Whenever communist ideals are mentioned in the dialogue, someone almost always refers to past failures to suggest the

impossibility of realizing such ideals. In this sense, the game captures different registers of capitalist realism from left melancholia to the closing of alternative horizons.

Such an alignment with the impasse diagnosed by the critical category of capitalist realism goes beyond the game world's sociopolitical fabric. Despite the playful dialogue options that the game provides and the way the player's inner dialogues change depending on their allocation of skill points, *Disco Elysium* offers a linear narrative. The player's effect on the skeleton narrative is limited as the game presents a predetermined narrative that eventually leads the player to the killer regardless of the player's actions. Thus, just as the category of capitalist realism points out the widespread conviction that there is no *outside* of capitalism, *Disco* captures this ostensibly insurmountable reality of capitalism by confining the player within a static narrative without the possibility of any change. However, despite what this representative register of the game suggests, *Disco*'s intricate use of inventory management shows that the game does more than just capture this seeming impasse.

## 4.2 Thought Cabinet as a subversion of the inventory management mechanism

Rather than offering multiple choices of in-game political subjectivity, *Disco* allows the player to shape their in-game subjectivity through the way they approach the dialogues and game events. In this sense, the interaction itself turns into a ludic mechanism through which subjectivity becomes the focal point—rather than utilizing preconceived paths for desired ends. In this way, *Disco* transforms inventory management by prioritizing experimentation over mission accomplishment. Instead of forcing players to follow a preset logic that is deemed *rational*, the game showcases possible subjectivities created by the very process of management. Consequently, *Disco* challenges and subverts the capitalist realist assumptions about resource management. This subversion stems from *Disco*'s game design that prioritizes the text: Since the game progresses as the player engages in dialogues, and as the player acquires thoughts by engaging with their environment, the utilization and management of *thoughts* as resources underline the social aspect of such a management. Despite the capitalist realist assumptions about exchange in the conventional use of inventory management, *Disco* shows that there is not only one management rationality. Here, it is significant that the game also features a conventional inventory management mechanism, where the player chooses costumes or tools to equip for their character. In addition to tools at their disposal, such as a wrench, the player has a spectrum of choices ranging from wildly informal fun costumes to formal ones that give perks or penalties to particular character stats. However, the player's in-game progress is not thoroughly limited based on the choices they make with regard to such costumes and tools since the game presents various ways to approach an objective. In this way, conventional inventory

management complements Thought Cabinet by providing a contrast regarding different rationalities in approaching resource management.

By replacing *thoughts* with conventional resources, Thought Cabinet allows the player to contemplate while developing their in-game character and subjectivity rather than following predetermined paths to complete a mission. In this way, *Disco* encourages the player to engage with the game world and perceive it as a *process* rather than as a *product*—since the game does not expect the player to strive simply to accomplish missions but rather to follow one lead to another even if those leads are not relevant to the murder case. Consequently, while *thoughts* turn into resources for inventory management, they are not commodified in the way items are commodified in a conventional RPG. As the purpose of *Disco* is to engage with other characters to understand the game events and act accordingly, the player's subjectivity takes shape according to their sense-making of the game world. In other words, managing in-game subjectivity itself becomes an act of play that shapes the experience of the game. As the player utilizes *thoughts* instead of conventional material resources, it becomes clear that the distribution of these items relies on the subjectivities one cares to foster. This foregrounds the importance of *play* in approaching inventory management, as there is no preset capitalist rationality in relation to the exchange process of resource management.

Huizinga (1980) defines play as an activity that takes the individual outside of the conventional flow of everyday life.

> From the point of view of a world wholly determined by the operation of blind forces, play would be altogether superfluous. Play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. The very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation. Animals play, so they must be more than merely mechanismal things. We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational.
>
> (Huizinga 1980, 3–4)

If capitalism tends to recuperate subversive acts to establish itself as *the reality*, then, being a realist necessarily means following the logic of exchange and calculation through a capitalist outlook. In this sense, "the irrationality of play" that Huizinga alludes to can be interpreted as imaginative resistance to the omnipresent reality of capital since the aforementioned quote emphasizes how play extends the perceived possibilities of the existing environment. Thus, by reworking inventory management into a game of *thought-collecting* that shapes the in-game subjectivity of the player, Thought Cabinet opens cracks within the capitalist realist outlook. Considering that the game compels the player to disregard convenient options in their approach to dialogue, *Disco* enables the player to acquire thoughts as a resistance—as an effort to protect their agency from ostensibly inevitable capitalist logic. In other words, demonstrating that capitalism is not the only possible reality but one of many that

is perpetuated through the assumption of lack of an alternative, Thought Cabinet transforms the underlying ideology of inventory management beyond utilitarian purposes.

As the player acquires potential thoughts to develop through conversations they engage in the game world, Thought Cabinet turns inventory management into a play in and of itself. For instance, the player may acquire a thought named *Some Kind of Superstar* when introducing themselves to other in-game characters at the beginning of the game, depending on how they approach the dialogue options. If they choose to be *playful* and do not perceive the game as a straightforward murder mystery and thus pick unconventional responses, they form a more humorous side to their in-game character. *Some Kind of Superstar* sets the tone for the game by decreasing a character stat, "Logic" (the reason for which is revealed within the game as the "price of self-delusion"), but increases the learning cap of four other stats, namely "Visual Calculus," "Suggestion," "Electrochemistry," and "Composure." In this sense, the Thought Cabinet foregrounds the element of play as opposed to the conventional material understanding of inventory management where the player strives for *conquest*. Huizinga writes:

> In play there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something. If we call the active principle that makes up the essence of play, "instinct", we explain nothing; if we call it "mind" or "will" we say too much. However we may regard it, the very fact that play has a meaning implies a non-materialistic quality in the nature of the thing itself.
>
> (Huizinga 1980, 1)

Similarly, by using the inventory mechanism in a playful manner for developing thoughts, Thought Cabinet subverts conventional inventory management. The way the player acquires thoughts by engaging with other characters in the game underlines how the player is part of a social context and depends on others in developing these thoughts. In this way, Thought Cabinet becomes a "free activity" that tends to foster a sense of interconnectedness in the sense Huizinga articulates:

> Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.
>
> (Huizinga 1980, 13)

Huizinga emphasizes how *play* allows its participants to leave the established affairs of things behind. Even though some thoughts give perks to the player's specific skills, Huizinga's articulation of play helps understand how Thought Cabinet presents another way to *imagine* inventory management. Foregrounding conversations with NPCs in acquiring thoughts, *Disco* underlines how the player is interconnected with others in shaping their subjectivity. As inventory management turns into a play of conversing with other characters, the management becomes more than simply allocating resources for the maximum material benefit for the player-character, which makes "material interest" in Thought Cabinet subordinate to the experience it provides for the player. In this sense, the very process of collecting resources, that is, thoughts, enables the player to *imagine* another way of exchange in inventory management: The player does not only collect thoughts to shape their in-game subjectivity, but they make sense of the game events through their in-game character. In other words, inventory management becomes an activity of sense-making rather than a capitalist transaction, which is a type of exchange whose sole purpose is nihilistic profit-making. By encouraging the player to engage the game world in different ways, *Disco* compels the player to experience the game world, and imagine beyond it, rather than see it as something to conquer. Here, the notion of *conquering* is referred to draw a parallel between how a player's conduct in a given game establishes a hierarchical relationship between the player and the rest of the game world and the ways in which capitalist subjects utilize their self to fulfill the requirements of ever-growing capital. The implications of a capitalist subject dreaming of *conquering* their environment while being conquered by capital will be explored through Lazzarato's understanding of the debt economy in the next section.

While this chapter does not mean to pose *experiencing* and *conquering* as a strict binary, *experiencing* the game world by paying attention to subjectivity allows the player to make sense of and grasp the communality of the social context, which is crucial for a post-capitalist outlook. Marx and Engels (1998) write in *The German Ideology*,

> Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the now existing premise.
>
> (1998, 57)

In this sense, striving for conquest assumes an ideal before the fact and does away with the movement that will have the capacity to shape the world. For a movement to emerge, existing capitalist *processes* should be accounted for in order to replace them with new ones. In other words, in order to shape capitalist subjectivity beyond the utilitarian purposes of the current *state of affairs*, there is a need to form *a new way of being* and set new processes in place. Doing so in a specific social context requires attentiveness to the social environment—the game world. If capitalism is a

"pervasive atmosphere," as Fisher (2009, 16) states, then the parameters of any political *conquest* are already overdetermined by capital since that mission reacts to *the existing state of affairs*. In this sense, *lateral agency* refers to the act of management of conditions that are not set up for peoples' flourishing.

Such a focus on experience reveals the playful avenues of resistance within an all-encompassing environment of everyday life—whether as a reference to capitalism or the game world. However, considering that the player is limited within a skeleton narrative; that is, regardless of their decisions, the major events of the game will be the same; the effectiveness of such resistance is ambiguous. Thus, it brings a question of ludic possibilities: Since the act of play emerges when the player is given a choice based on a set of rules, what happens if the player is not aware that their choice is predetermined by the rules, or that the mission that they are on is not set up for their flourishing? This question inevitably invokes Berlant's *cruel optimism* while foregrounding another question: what does lateral agency arising out of a decidedly ludic world show us? Commenting on eating disorders, Berlant (2011) writes:

> The structural position of the overwhelmed life intensifies this foreshortening of consciousness and fantasy. Under a regime of crisis ordinariness, life feels truncated, more like desperate doggy paddling than like a magnificent swim out to the horizon. Eating adds up to something, many things: maybe the good life, but usually a sense of well-being that spreads out for a moment, not a projection toward a future. Paradoxically, of course, at least during this phase of capital, there is less of a future when one eats without an orientation toward it.
>
> (117)

Berlant's use of lateral agency in relation to eating disorders stems from their interest in "the overwhelming ordinary that is disorganized by [capitalism]" (8). *Disco* can be seen through a similar prism since the purpose of the game is the interaction itself in a world where player agency/choice may seem like an illusion. In parallel to Berlant's articulation, this interaction may be one of managing misery since it is not a future-oriented "life-building" activity but fighting for survival. In this sense, the game informs the player about the specific changes to the specific character skills their choice will bring, but what those character skills will change in the game world is still ambiguous. Such a reliance on the ambiguity of consequences brings in a sense of play to lateral agency and problematizes goal-oriented thought patterns. In this way, the game complicates the category of capitalist realism since it proposes that despite the supposedly insurmountable reality of capitalism, the primary issue is the way subjects relate and interact with this reality, which is why *imagining otherwise* becomes a challenge: the fight is about *imagining* an alternative existence.

## 4.3 Imagining beyond the mission-oriented rationality

From the beginning, *Disco* compels the player to experiment with the game world. For instance, the game begins with an excessive number of tasks to complete, but it also warns the player not to rush completion since everyone will complete such tasks in their own time. As the player's time does not revolve around those tasks but engaging in conversation with other characters, *Disco* shows that it is not a mission-oriented game but one that relies on experimentation and creation of moments. While this may be a claim of a variety of games, *Disco*'s distinguishing feature is Thought Cabinet since it encourages players to engage and take part in the game world rather than approaching dialogue options in terms of the convenience they will provide for accomplishing tasks. The unconventional dialogue options are rewarded not only with more interesting conversations but also with new thoughts one can acquire for their Thought Cabinet. When equipped, these thoughts give certain perks or disadvantages to the player-character in the game world. For instance, depending on how the player answers a question about their past, they gain the ability to internalize the "Lonesome Long Way Home" thought that gives a "temporary research bonus" to the Encyclopedia skill.

Thought Cabinet helps subvert the usual interaction pattern in games where the player approaches the other characters just to receive quests. In this sense, the game encourages the player to be attentive to social context in their dialogues with NPCs. This can also be seen in the way the game plays with the "buddy cop" trope. While the amnesiac character the player controls in the game, Harry-the-detective, initially seems to be incompetent, the game shows that Harry is, in fact, a competent detective thanks to the personal dynamic created through their partner, Kim Kitsuragi, who is an understanding and methodical detective—but this becomes apparent only through the friendship the player fosters with their partner. Unlike the way the player is mocked by their colleagues in the precinct when they report losing their gun and badge, the interactions with Kim Kitsuragi almost always have a more friendly tone. In this sense, the game also points out how the sense of interconnectedness (or, in this case, friendship) lifts and reveals the player-character's personal skills as much as it allows them to flourish as a human being.

Such handling of the notion of interconnectedness and inviting the player to pick *inconvenient* dialogue options complement the game's use of the Thought Cabinet mechanism. In this sense, *Disco*'s approach to experimentation goes beyond the failure-success binary in conventional game design. The game constantly incentivizes the player to create moments in the game world, rather than *conquer* it, and become one of its inhabitants, instead of rushing to completion of objectives that are mostly busywork. This sometimes takes the form of a reflection by allowing the player to express their affectual response to a dialogue—like the line: "Don't I have a single normal thing to say?" Sometimes it allows the player to be "distracted." For instance, while doing a field autopsy on the hanged body, the player could end up filling out the form with wrong information because of Cuno and Cunoesse's interferences—and thus note down what they say ("fucky-fucky" or "pigs gonna have sex") instead of what should be written down. In this way, *Disco* goes outside of mission-oriented rationality.

At this point, a brief detour to the literature on finance is pertinent to show why *Disco*'s subversion of mission-oriented game design problematizes the capitalist realist outlook through lateral agency. Asserting that finance is a relation of power established through debtor-creditor relationship—instead of simply "excess of speculation" or "expression of the greed and rapaciousness of 'human nature' " (Lazzarato 2012, 24), Lazzarato writes in *The Making of the Indebted Man*: "Debt is finance from the point of view of the debtors who have to repay it. Interest is finance from the point of view of creditors, security-holders who guarantee they benefit from debt" (Lazzarato 2012). Thus, the central operation of neoliberalism is "manufacturing debt" (2012, 25). Considering that finance is not parasitic on the "real" economy but is the driving force of the contemporary economy, and that the production of surplus through finance relies on private debt (Adkins; Allon, "The Feminisation of Finance"; Allon, "Speculating on Everyday Life"; Martin; Allon, "Everyday Leverage, or Leveraging the Everyday"), management of inventory *and* misery becomes a survival tactic for contemporary capitalist subjects. Here, the critical insight is capitalist rationality: By analyzing the movement of money on a grand scale—how private debt is securitized and turned into other financial products for trading—and the social dynamics that the flow of money relies on, such studies on finance parse the dynamics of contemporary capitalism and position its rationality of speculation and power as central to social organization. However, even when taking the everyday as their category of analysis, such studies are still tethered to a view from above rather than from below. The significance of lateral agency appears at this point since it is concerned with the *skewed* management of misery caused by such capitalist dynamics—as misery is an inevitable consequence of a capital-centered society and an individual cannot contrive ways of fighting *against* such consequences by themself.

In this regard, centering debt in understanding the contemporary economy is critical for grasping positionality in the current *state of affairs* and the expectations placed on atomized individuals. Referencing Nietzsche, Lazzarato (2012) states that guilt and morality are innate to debt because the notion of *guilt* stems from that of *debt*. As such, through the debt relationship, a new subjectivity takes shape on the basis of guilt, and every individual becomes a "debtor" (2012, 30). In a debt society, one's "relationship to the self" changes as they have to turn themselves into human capital, and they are at fault if they cannot do so (2012, 52). In this sense, the debtor is not expected to pay in monetary form but in "conduct, attitudes, ways of behaving, plans, subjective commitments, the time devoted to finding a job, the time used for conforming oneself to the criteria dictated by the market and business, etc." (2012, 104). While Lazzarato poses this as the way the debt economy "exploits subjectivity" (2012, 52), it also refers us to the economic *and* political dimensions of capitalism that the concept of capitalist realism refers to: capitalism does seem inescapable since it conditions even one's "relationship to the self."

Even though *Disco* allows the player to shape their in-game experience in the way they acquire and internalize thoughts, the player is still confined to a skeleton narrative that they cannot radically transform as they manage their character's

inventory *and* misery. Accordingly, the player agency stemming from Thought Cabinet is reminiscent of what Berlant conceptualizes as lateral agency, considering that the player constructs their subjectivity by allocating resources. However, as the player collects thoughts by engaging in conversations, the lateral agency arising out of the Thought Cabinet repurposes the capitalist rationality of inventory management into a play of contemplation in engaging with the game world, that is, grasping the social context while shaping and being shaped by it. Such a *play* in a capital-saturated world, where crisis is a constant, shows that lateral agency is not only a survival tactic but also daring to *imagine otherwise* despite the conditioning of the capitalist logic of exchange. In this sense, Thought Cabinet enables the player to rethink their "relationship to the self," as Lazzarato calls it (52), and subverts mission-oriented game design since the inventory management mechanism is not only about accomplishing an objective but also about making sense of the objective.

Similar to Berlant's (2011) usage of lateral agency, *Disco*'s subversion of mission-oriented rationality falls outside of the binary of winning or losing but with a preemptive acceptance of failure. Positioning lateral agency as basically a survival mechanism, Berlant writes:

> [I]n the scene of slow death, a condition of being worn out by the activity of *reproducing life*, agency can be an activity of maintenance, not making; fantasy, without grandiosity; sentience without full intentionality; inconsistency, without shattering; and embodying, alongside embodiment.
>
> (Berlant 2011, 100; added emphasis)

In times of capitalist realism, the referent of "reproducing life" is vague at best and striving to be a proper capitalist subject at worst. Berlant (2011) addresses this predicament while stating how debates around eating disorders are framed as individual problems in dramatic ways by hegemonic political outlooks:

> How do we think about labor and consumer-related subjectivities in the same moment, since, in my view, one cannot talk about scandals of the appetite—along with food, there's sex, smoking, shopping, and drinking as sites of moral disapprobation, social policy, and self-medication—without talking about the temporality of the workday, the debt cycle, and consumer practice and fantasy?
>
> (Berlant 2011, 105)

Berlant questions what it means to "have a life" by asking if it is "now the process to which one gets resigned, after dreaming of the good life, or not even dreaming?" (Berlant 2011, 117). Similarly, they use lateral agency to articulate how excessive eating can be a way for one to "[be] in the world enjoyably" (2011, 115), even though people are not "always fully present to their motives, desires, feelings, and experiences, or as even desiring to be" (2011, 284). With Thought Cabinet, *Disco* enables the player to focus precisely on those "motives, desires, feelings, and

experiences" as any potential change can only come through a reevaluation of *present ways of being*. As the problem is having an alternative referent of the "good life" that is beyond the capitalist perceptions, *Disco* asks the player to be attentive to their own role in the sociopolitical mechanisms preventing them from imagining. Otherwise, and to use Berlant's words, how can it be possible to "distort the present on behalf of what the present can become" before realizing one's own involvement in the present of "crisis ordinariness" (2011, 263)? In this sense, acquiring and managing thoughts in Thought Cabinet shows that a sense of collectivity makes imagining possible as the player makes sense of the game world while *playing with* an inventory management mechanism. *Disco*'s repurposing of inventory management as Thought Cabinet and turning the mechanism itself into play—considering in addition to how the game promotes experimentation and engagement with the game world at every turn—shows that lateral agency in a ludic world carries the potential of transforming the "crisis ordinariness," that is capitalist realism. As such, *Disco* accounts both for the political reality of everyday life and its affective register in its demonstration of a playful individual praxis to connect with others to create moments.

In this sense, *Disco*'s focus on experimentation transforms the way the present is traded for the future in inventory management: The player does not calculate anymore but looks for cracks in how their subjectivity takes form. While it is still managing misery, lateral agency coming out of this ludic mechanism shows that insisting on fighting without completely yielding to the logic of exchange becomes a form of resistance. Or, as a thought in *Disco*, "The Precarious World," states: "*The only way to load the dice is to keep on fighting.*" Thus, rejecting the logic of calculation inherent to conventional inventory management and focusing on how subjectivity is shaped becomes a way to foreground the present against the future, rather than trading for it. This may not be a "life-building" activity; however, when there is no alternative understanding of life under capitalism, insisting on the present against the future becomes a way of resisting the subjectivity imposed by crushing debt—even though the questions of its effectivity are something to be explored further.

## 4.4 Conclusion

With the category of capitalist realism, Fisher designates a prevalent perception of contemporary capitalism by historicizing it and using fiction as an analogy, and he designs a narrative that seeks to explain the predicaments of the present. Thus, the concept of capitalist realism deals with narrativization since it focuses on the sense of impasse—the widespread conviction that there is no alternative. However, what does it mean to have no alternatives? What does it mean to have no *outside* of capitalism? Should everyone just conform to this imposed reality and thus accept the subjectivity shaped in the image of capital by becoming a *realist* who calculates their daily endgames within a machine of exchange? Should anti-capitalists hold on to past ideals expressed in failed political programs? How should anyone *imagine* while managing misery and flailing around the world?

There is no clear-cut answer to any of these questions as they necessarily emerge at the intersection of political and existential realities. However, in lieu of precise answers, *Disco Elysium* suggests that there are ludic cracks within this seemingly static historical narrative—despite the apt diagnosis of Fisher that the present time is marked by political despair and a sense of impasse. These cracks are where the *player* survives in the game world and where agency becomes "an activity of maintenance," in Berlant's (2011, 100) words. *Disco* invites the player to experiment and embrace failure by going outside of mission-oriented video game design. The transformation of the inventory management mechanism into a game of its own suggests that lateral agency can be a way to challenge the ideological assumptions of capitalist realism. While lateral agency in this ludic world is still managing misery as a survival tactic, it is a repudiation of the assumption that there is no alternative, since the player does not have to rely on a capitalist logic of calculation.

By opening up a space for experimentation and encouraging the player to be attentive to what's beyond the murder mystery, the game complements its reworking of inventory management. In addition, *Disco* also underlines the social aspect of any kind of inventory management since acquiring thoughts for the Thought Cabinet requires the player to engage the game world and the other characters. In this sense, the Thought Cabinet rejects the political cynicism in the times of capitalist realism by emphasizing the importance of play as a concept. The way *Disco* addresses the social aspect of inventory management and emphasizes the importance of experimentation fit into Fisher's understanding of anti-capitalism as he articulates in *Capitalist Realism*. However, as Fisher (2009, 79) writes that "an effective anti-capitalism must be a rival to Capital, not a reaction to it," it is hard to say whether Fisher would embrace *play* as a form of anti-capitalism, given that this chapter does not consider *play* simply as a reaction.

By making them allocate "thoughts," *Disco* makes the player focus on the philosophy of inventory management. For such management is not only about making decisions based on what you have and what you need, or may need in the future, but about how you understand notions of value, distribution, interaction and purpose. In this sense, the game transforms the inventory mechanism where the rationality of exchange imposes a capitalist logic on the player. *Disco* invites the player to contemplate how the *resources*—thoughts—which they collect and manage shape their subjectivity and experiment with them in engaging the game world. In this way, rather than being misery management as a form of escape from the social, Thought Cabinet's inventory management brings imagination back to the everyday: each thought presents a possibility of an alternative as the player flails around the game world where the murder mystery becomes the surface of understanding the world rather than a simple task to be solved.

One could even say that this is how revolutions come about: a community taking the risk of squatting those cracks and making them bigger as the community itself grows. Thus, despite its depressive outlook at first glance, *Disco* shows that even a mechanism like inventory management that relies on the contemporary ideological disposition of calculation could be repurposed. As the player moves away from a

mission-oriented perspective toward prioritizing imagination, the cracks become more apparent—for the question of subjectivities comes to occupy the player's focus. In a way, the game makes the player realize that the *political* in the political economy is not dependent on the *economy* but on something that modifies it.

## Note

1. Reflecting on Walter Benjamin's critique of Erich Kästner, Wendy Brown identifies the nostalgic outlook pervading contemporary left politics as left melancholia. Either holding on to past political victories and ruminating on them or exhausted by the losses suffered by labor movements, there is a left-wing subjectivity that is bereft of a community and a coherent understanding of the present historical moment. In this sense, understanding capitalist realism simply as capitalism being the only possible system signals a resignation that is diagnosed by Wendy Brown (1999) as left-melancholia: "We come to love our left passions and reasons, our left analyses and convictions, more than we love the existing world that we presumably seek to alter with these terms or the future that would be aligned with them" (21). ⏎

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# 5 The detective dandy and the Marxist hypothesis

## *Disco Elysium* as critique of the millennial left

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### Introduction

The award-winning indie computer game *Disco Elysium* is rife with plot lines that echo the anti-capitalist sentiments of what Cutrone (2023) terms "the Millennial Left." Most interestingly, for the purposes of this paper, while character choice, psychological development and drug abuse offer the basis of multiple different procedural pathways for completing the game, it cannot be gainsaid that capitalism itself is a haunting presence in the game's overall plot. Yet, as noted in many of the contributions to this volume, this is not a game where you necessarily play the part of an antagonist of capitalism. Instead, you play the role of a hardboiled detective trying to solve a murder. To achieve your goal, you must first learn to navigate the labor disputes wracking Martinaise, an impoverished dockland district in the city of Revachol. Taking on the investigation, the player soon gets to meet and dialogue not only with striking union workers but also with some rightwing scabs intent on breaking the picket line. Later, you can engage in conversation with corporate executives who themselves display a mastery of advanced Marxist terminology, and even a basic sympathy with the tenets of Marxism. You can also meet and talk with student theorists about the work of Kras Mazov, the founder of "Mazovian economics." From such encounters, you learn of theoretical schisms in the world of the game that bear marked (albeit estranged) similarities with the splits between the various Marxist tendencies of our own world.

Nevertheless, while its plot evokes many of the same ontological fixities of capitalism that preoccupy Marxists and expresses sympathy with many ostensibly Marxist beliefs, the game struggles with the historical specificity of the proletariat as the universal subject of modern human liberation. Indeed, Mazovian traditionalists are referred to derisively as economic reductionists or "econoclards." Their ostensibly Marxist premises are mocked as naively modernist and dangerous,

resting on a presumption of *proletarian exceptionalism*. This is clear, as we will argue, whenever the game tries to explain the failures of the "Antecentennial Revolution" or tries to address the possibilities of socialist technological development in the face of environmental limitations. To cap off the insults, when the identity of the killer is finally revealed, he turns out to be an aged and dementia-addled former political commissar of the Commune of Revachol who is unable to give up on his old "reductionist" Mazovian ideals. Such descriptions serve as not-so-veiled allusions to New Left sentiments about the Marxist critique of political economy and the necessarily illiberal nature of the proletarian struggle.

In *Disco Elysium*, it thus appears to go without saying that older forms of Marxism were naively optimistic about the social and moral character of the working class. Ultimately, the game presents the working class as a cultural problem occurring within capitalist *modernity*, a sort of morbid symptom of modernity's colonization of the "life-world," and not as a material phenomenon arising necessarily within the contradictions of capitalist *political economy*. Indeed, what Cutrone (2024) calls the "Marxist hypothesis," or the notion that our liberation can be achieved only through a proletariat-led transcendence of capitalism, appears to be taken seriously within the game only to the extent that it can be leveraged as a straw man to expose the naiveté of those who defend it. In this respect, the plot bears a marked resemblance to the theoretical perspective of Mark Fisher, possibly the best-known anti-capitalist thinker of the Millennial Left (Carlebach 2019). Known primarily for his concept of capitalist realism, Fisher is categorized frequently as a Marxist. Approaching the problem of capitalism in culturalist terms, however, Fisher believed capitalism today has not only subsumed everything into its morally relativistic system of exchange equivalence, but that there has recently been a shift in the basis of political reproduction. Thus, where, for example, the Keynesian capitalism of the postwar order endured based on a claim to promote general prosperity, today's capitalism is weak and survives only through the propagation of a belief that there is no alternative. The result, claims Fisher, is mass "hedonic depression" (2009).

Revachol, the ruined city at the heart of the game, appears in this respect to be an allegory for the very "end of the world" that Fisher argues is "easier to imagine" than the end of capitalism (2009). Yet the *fatalism* of the game is arguably nowhere more prominently displayed than in its seemingly open procedurality. The procedural structure of the game channels the player toward a countercultural politics that seeks to restore the conditions of possibility for nonlinear creativity by means of *a tactical ethos* of the self, akin to that evoked by Foucault (1984) in his theory of the dandy. As detailed by Gürses in the preceding chapter, the player's psychological choices are important in the gameplay. Depending on your character's development, you can count to varying degrees on your intellect, psyche, physique and motorics skills to help get you through. While each of these capacities brings its own rewards and limitations, each also poses a possible avenue for facilitating the detective in his quest to recover his psyche from the grips of his capitalist realism-induced depression. Admittedly, there is no one "correct" way to develop your

"cop" self in the game. You may play as a communist, a "hobo" anarchist, a neoliberal "ultra" or even a fascist. Yet the question of these political commitments seems to be quite beside the point, so long as the player is willing to embrace an aesthetic ethos of what we might call *disco dandyism*. This countercultural ethos involves the wearing of flamboyant clothing, a modest consumption of mind-altering substances and frequent communing with the multitude of subjectivities in one's own head. By making countercultural behavior a necessary part of the gameplay itself, the game emphasizes the importance of dandyism in the passage to "Le Retour," a revolutionary event believed to be imminent by many of the citizens of Martinaise. It is said that this event will restore self-government and thusly enable once again the psycho-subjective conditions for true nonlinear creativity.

In the below, we explore the stakes of *Disco Elysium*'s implicit commitment to dandyism as an effective praxis of anti-capitalist struggle via an interrogation of three interrelated Millennial Left myths operating in the plot of the game, as well as at the level of the game's basic procedurality. In Section One, we examine the myth that revolutionary strategy predicated on Mazovian *political economy* is necessarily doomed to fail because of its commitment to proletarian exceptionalism. Then, in Section Two, we examine the game's commitment to the fatalistic myth that it is not only easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, but that the best way to grasp the nature of capitalism is by imagining the end of the world. Here, we show a number of clear isomorphisms between Fisher's critique of capitalist realism and the kind of stagnated "undead" mode of capitalism featured in the game. In Section Three, however, we note that the game also believes there are strategic opportunities on offer within capitalist realism. The happy news is that because capitalism itself is succeeding in bringing about the circumstances of its own destruction, proletarian exceptionalism is no longer necessary. Capitalism's weakness, in this sense, has cleared the path for a countercultural "disco" struggle that can inaugurate Le Retour. Crucially, however, this is not just a question of the prioritization of "disco" within the plot. As we will develop in Conclusion, millennial fatalism is also embedded at the level of the game's very procedurality. The open auto-poetical element in the gameplay invites the player to engage in an ethos of dandyism or, that is, a tactical aesthetics of the self. And it is this tactical dandyism which, it is anticipated, will hasten Le Retour. However, as we argue, certain elements of the game also work to undermine this historical account. As we will show, some characters challenge the efficacy of a revolutionary program grounded in transgressive aesthetics and suggest that the necessary task remains one of a fundamentally Marxist nature. That is, one of resolving the contradictions of capitalist political economy.

## 5.1 The failed revolution and the myth of proletarian exceptionalism

Revachol is a city still reeling from the effects of a failed socialist revolution that took place some fifty years ago. And, as discussed in Introduction to this volume, the game strongly implies that the Antecentennial Revolution's defeat was not just a

question of the Coalition's overwhelmingly superior military capacity. The game wants us to understand that there were issues within the revolutionary ranks too. As we pursue the murder investigation, we encounter subjects representing a number of the various left-wing ideological factions of Martinaise. Our conversations with these individuals help us grasp not only the worldviews of these factions and the nature of their disagreements with each other but also, crucially, their shared sense of how the Left itself was partly to blame for the failure of the Revolution. When we talk to Steban, the "student communist," for example, we get a strong sense of the consensus on this score. He explains that there are basically two "schools" of thought on the Left in Elysium. The first are what he terms the "Econoclards," or those who are strict adherents to the original teachings of Kras Mazov, the founder of "Mazovian Socio-Economics" and "father of scientific communism." Mazov is presented as an intellectual and a revolutionary figure of immense historical significance in the game. Although his life story seems to incorporate borrowed biographical elements from the lives of a number of famous Leftists of our own world, including Lenin and Stalin, the initials of his name and his status as the foundational theorist of "historical materialism" suggest he is an analogue primarily to Karl Marx.

It appears to go without saying for the contemporary Left within the game that the Mazovian critique is economically reductionist and that this reductionism contributed significantly to the failure of the Revolution. When the Leftists of today's Martinaise refer to Mazovians as "econoclards," they are using the term derisively, insinuating that economic reductionism caused Mazovian theory to assign a certain moral exceptionalism to the proletarian struggle which made it vulnerable in turn to the temptations of totalitarianism. Joyce Messier summarizes the problem of proletarian exceptionalism in terms of the revolutionaries' sense of manifest destiny. The communards believed not only that "the Key of History is in the lock," as she says, but that it was their duty to "keep turning" it "at any cost."

In this fashion, monstrous atrocities were carried out in the name of the Revolution. During the six years of proletarian dictatorship in Graad, for example, some 15 million people were killed. Churches were razed. Labor camps were established in the region of "Yekokataa" for bourgeois reeducation, and similar camps could also be found in Samara and Revachol. Meanwhile, in Samara, Ignus Nilsen, Mazov's "most trusted lieutenant," ordered 12,000 prisoners of war to be impaled on sharpened tree stumps. Communards also naively pursued utopian technological projects without regard to environmental limitations. One such project, the People's Pile, was a particle decay generator that would have created an unlimited supply of energy for "under-served communities." However, as we learn from Bird's Nest Roy, a pawnshop owner who worked on the subsequent cleanup operation, the project blew up the minute it was turned on. The explosion resulted in an ecological disaster, releasing "radioactive waste" into the River Esperance, the effects of which linger to the present day.

Yet if the old deterministic Mazovianism is today seen as morally bankrupt, this does not mean Mazovianism is dead. Newer, more culturalist strands of Mazovianism

can be found in the game. The most important of these, according to Steban, is the Gottwald School. During the game, we meet Lilienne the Net Picker, a fisherwoman of modest means and a self-declared devotee of the Gottwaldian approach. From her perspective, capitalism is less a problem arising from objective forces in the realm of political economy and more a symptom of modernity's techno-scientific colonization of the "life-world." As she observes at one point:

> Our things are a part of our life-world. They're made with human sweat and they share human history. We should care about them as we care about humans. To some extent at least.

Lilienne is expressing here the Gottwaldian belief that the Left needs to shift its analytical focus away from the material sphere of political economy and toward the sphere of culture and non-material human concerns. Our conceptualization skill tells us that the concept of the lifeworld was developed by "last century Gottwaldian philosophers." The political upshot of their approach, says Steban, was to downgrade the leadership role traditionally ascribed to "intellectuals" within Marxist movements and to reimagine the locus of political change as immanent to the lifeworld itself. To Gottwaldians, therefore, the role of the intellectual is not to serve as a vanguard of revolutionary change but merely to nudge the movement from the margins through relentless cultural critique. In this respect, as we will elaborate below, there are clear isomorphisms between the teachings of the Gottwald School and those of our own world's Frankfurt School.

Another culturalist strain mentioned in the game is infra-materialism, a hybrid Trotskyist-Maoist analogue that is still hegemonic in Samara. Steban, who is himself very much an infra-materialist, tells us that the core idea of this approach is that "a thought can be a very powerful thing." This view is confirmed in a long article titled "TipTop Tournée: A Critical Mazovian Perspective" in the Mazovian theoretical journal *La Fumée Vol. 1 No. 4*, which we can find in the office of the Harbour Secretariat. Later, we learn this article was authored by Steban and his friend under the pseudonyms Nasteb Encalada-Bernal and Exilus Bücher. In the piece, the pair argue that the problem with capitalism is its tendency to subsume everything into a system of commodified equivalence. Thus, for example, it has no moral qualms about taking a competitive motor racing event like the "TipTop Tournée" and turning it into an orgy of advertising underwritten by "spectacular violence." In the world of *Disco Elysium*, however, intersubjective thought is a socio-psychic substance. Thus, for infra-materialists, it is possible to take seriously, for example, the idea that crop yields "will naturally increase" when farmed under "suitably revolutionary conditions." Indeed, as we learn in the book *A Brief Look at Infra-Materialism*, we can see that Nilsen, the founder of infra-materialism, who was also Mazov's right-hand man, specifically rejected the laws of "bourgeois physics" and believed that meditation can empower specific leaders to attain higher forms of consciousness, thereby granting them the ability to inspire their followers by sheer force of their own will. Clearly then, while the infra-materialists and the Gottwald school both prioritize the role of cultural critique, they diverge sharply on the role of intellectual leaders.

Now, *Disco Elysium* is obviously pulling heavily on the fantasy genre with some of these more estranged world-building elements; real-world Marxists generally don't believe in magic. Yet, as we will elaborate, the cognitive overlap between the views of Leftists within the game and the perspectives of the Millennial Left of our own world is tangible. Joyce is not a leftist, so it makes sense that she attributes blame for the Revolution's atrocities to the moral exceptionalism assigned to the proletariat in unalloyed Mazovian theory. Yet numerous hints in the game suggest that Leftists are also concerned about the problematically illiberal character of the working class. In the case of Lilienne, for example, it goes without saying that Titus Hardie's union boys care only "about themselves," and are all too happy to serve as the unquestioning enforcers of the corrupt union boss, Evrart Claire. Elsewhere, Neha the Novelty Dicemaker tells us of the defunct hair salon Andro-Orlando Hair SCA, and the unpopularity of the "androgynous hairstyles" they offered among "working-class men." Worse, the plot of the game itself suggests that the working class are a cultural problem. This is clear, for example, if we accept a side quest offered to us by a "working class woman" to find her missing husband. When we finally locate the husband, he is referred to only as a "working class corpse" and it becomes quickly apparent that he has drunk himself to death.

Yet the purest expression of this concern about the moral character of the proletariat must surely be the Deserter, Iosef Lilianovich Dros, Political Commissar of the 114th Anti-Aircraft Division of the 4th Army of the Commune of Revachol. Hiding within the ruins of an island bunker complex just off Martinaise, Dros presents as an old and lonely figure, exhibiting early signs of dementia. We learn during our investigations that he is the killer. Yet the revelation of his guilt is arguably less important to the plot than what our conversation with him reveals about the moral exceptionalism of Mazovian theory. For Dros was no ordinary soldier. As a Political Commissar, he was "trained in historical materialism" and served an elite ideological function within the ranks of the ICM. Despite his dementia, his training appears to remain intact, and the game portrays him as a revolutionary who cannot let go of his problematic views. To this day, for example, Dros believes in "the historic role of the proletariat" and "the irreducible laws of historic materialism." We learn that his love for "proletkult" is equaled only by his hatred for "social democrats." We learn that he believes art is a bourgeois construct, and "an affront to humanity," and that "every gallery should be bulldozed, and the artists should all be given 30 years of hard labour in Yekokataa." We learn that he is in fact so purist in his revolutionary commitments that he cannot abide the whimsical "bourgeois idealism" of the present-day Left, including its fetishization of urban culture and its belief that cities can talk. Finally, in what is arguably his most illiberal moment, he tells us that "the bourgeoisie are not human."

## 5.2 Capitalist realism and the death of the "New Style"

One of the big problems faced by the citizens of Revachol is the widespread sense that their futures have been cancelled, and that it is now easier to imagine the end

of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. The citizens have good reason to believe this, too. Signs of disaster lurk everywhere. And not only in the war-torn state of the buildings on the Waterfront, and the dilapidated Fishermen's Shacks. From talking to the inhabitants of Martinaise, we get a strong sense that the economy is in tatters and that a disciplinary and precarity-creating version of capitalism has become hegemonic. This version of capitalism, we learn, has arrived largely as a result of the failure of the previous iteration, known ironically as "the New Style." The New Style refers to the "ultraliberal" mode of capital accumulation that came into existence during "the New," a popular moniker for the third decade of the current century or, that is, the decade that began some twenty years after the Revolution. Of this time, our Encyclopedia skill tells us, "Enough time had passed from the failure of the Revolution that, for a fleeting moment, free market economy seemed like the uncontested way of life for our species." As with the 1970s of our own world, when neoliberal ideology began to become hegemonic in the halls of Western power, this period in *Elysium* was characterized by "disco, decadence, and the victory of democracy-powered free market economy." Culturally, the period was dynamic—characterized by a flourishing youth scene, the rise of pop star icons like Guillaume Le Million, and a pervasive trend toward conspicuous consumption. Indeed, we learn that the architectural tastes of the time favored "gold-and-champagne-tinted interiors and façades."

The nature of the cataclysm that befell the New Style is never made clear in the game. However, we learn from Joyce Messier that "quantitative easing" failed to arrest it. In this light, it seems reasonable to assume that the crisis involved the bursting of some or other debt-fueled asset bubble. By contrast, today's successor to the New Style appears to be a rather sickly version of capitalism. The recognizably disheveled and lumpen style in which many of the game's figures are drawn evokes a Dickensian affect. As if to underline the point, Joyce tells us that "capital is finished." However, she adds, this is not necessarily good news: "its end won't *free* anyone. It will only lead to more suffering." If anyone would have an eagle-eye view on this matter, it would likely be Joyce. After all, she is a corporate insider—a fixer for the global shipping corporation, Wild Pines. Ideologically, Joyce self-describes as "ultraliberal." No coincidence, therefore, that the in-game artwork portrays her as a lookalike of the famed British neoliberal prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. Joyce's hair is similarly brushed up and fixed in place, clearly evoking Thatcher's iconic style. She thus appears to be a good source for an insider perspective on what went wrong with capitalism. And indeed, as we converse with her on this topic, our Shivers skill will confirm the truth of her words: "CAPITAL IS PAST."

But of course, "past" here has a double meaning. On the one hand, there is the sense that capitalism is dead, lingering on in zombie-like fashion only because nobody has yet come up with a proper replacement. In this respect, the situation evokes the "morbid symptoms" of Gramsci's famous quote: "the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born." On the other hand, there is a sense that capital itself is composed of the past—that it is nothing more than the accumulation of long-since-dead labor. For in this era of zombie capital that has come in the wake

of the New Style, we can see plainly that entrepreneurial creativity has succumbed almost completely to stagnation. Perhaps nowhere in the game is this made clearer than in the context of our conversation with Neha the Dicemaker. It is from her that we learn of the curse of the Doomed Commercial Area (DCA). Formerly known as the East Delta Commercial Center, the DCA was once a business incubator of sorts, created in order to nurture entrepreneurialism and give small business ventures a start. Today, the Dicemaker's shop is the last operational enterprise in the complex. As she explains the bizarre misfortunes that have befallen its many startups, Harry begins to think the DCA must be cursed. Yet, explains Neha, there is no curse. Rather, the failures are a natural effect of the current mode of capitalism. Upon hearing this, Harry gets a new option in the Thought Cabinet called "The Precarious World." In the description of this thought, we learn how in capitalism today "everyone's mostly losing."

The general disaster afflicting the world of *Disco Elysium* can thus readily be understood as a result of the paradoxical continuity of a capitalism that has long since ceased to function. Arguably, the world-building in this respect is drawing heavily on Mark Fisher's theory of capitalist realism (2009). As discussed in Gürses's chapter in this volume, Fisher's engagement with contemporary capitalism rotates principally around an idea expressed originally by Fredric Jameson:

> Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world.
>
> (2003, 76)

This first part of this quote is cited frequently by thinkers of the Left. It is often taken to mean that capitalism today endures not because it is strong, or because it solves our economic problems, but because of the historical failure of the left-revolutionary project. Yet Fisher seems to focus more on the second part of the quote. For him, the fact that we are all living at the end of the world presents us with a unique opportunity to say something about what capitalism is.

Drawing on Foucault's lectures on the birth of biopolitics (2008), Fisher explains that *neoliberalism* is a political project with an extremist vision for a complete anthropological reinvention of humanity as *homo economicus*, or economic man. Neoliberalism became ascendant in the 1970s as the intellectual blueprint for many of the policymakers and pro-capitalist intellectuals of our time. Yet neoliberal *ideology* is far from the main issue here. As Fisher argues, it is simply not the case that we have been brainwashed or seduced by some kind of simplistic love for free market ideology. To the contrary, a primary feature of neoliberalism is its "business ontology" or the idea that all of society should be "run as a business" (2009). Crucially, "business ontology" is a form of subjective responsibilization that functions via the psychological logic of *gaslighting*. Thus, when bad things happen to us, this logic tells us that we have only ourselves to blame and that the solutions to our problems can be found only within ourselves. To overcome our problems, then,

we must dig deep and find resilience. That is, we must "practice gratitude," "lean in," and have "difficult conversations" about our daily struggles, all while simultaneously having the basic conditions of our self-reproduction pulled out from under us.

Importantly, Fisher invokes the idea that a central part of neoliberalism's political project is the subsumption of any lingering non-marketized cultural domains or elements of the "lifeworld." The issue then is how the experience of an ever-expanding regime of precarity is affecting the relationship of ordinary people to their own sense of political efficacy. To explain this, Fisher invokes the 2006 dystopian film by Alfonso Cuarón, *Children of Men*. In this film, humanity has become infertile. As a result, depression has become widespread and government has all but shut down, save for the military. The film is allegorical insofar as it evokes the creative infertility of humanity under capitalist realism. The longevity of capitalism today is therefore explained not by the might of its ideology but rather by the spreading feeling that "it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (2009). Thus, while it is true that neoliberal politicians continue to offer ideological justifications for their political project, neoliberalism is no longer really an ideological project. Rather, through the colonization of all of human life within the disciplinary logic of the market, neoliberalism seeks to disrupt our belief in our own collective agency. Alternatively expressed, its target is the very legacy of optimism of the postwar capitalist era.

Capitalist realism in this fashion reveals the paradoxical cruelty of contemporary political economy. For today, says Fisher, real technological possibilities exist that would, if appropriated within a properly democratic program, help inaugurate the long-promised "Red Plenty" (2018a) of communist abundance—the overcoming of poverty and the provision of abundant opportunities for everyone in our species to experience genuine and truly collective kinds of joy. Indeed, in some ways the working class today has never been freer. We have access to all manner of communicative technologies that allow for an unprecedented range of cosmopolitan encounters. Here, Fisher cites the Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse, that capitalism today has advanced to the stage that it allows us opportunities for "liberating the individual from the constraints once justified by scarcity and immaturity" (2018). The tragedy, however, is that capitalist realism functions to ward off the very possibility of that joyful collectivity. As Fisher notes in an unfinished essay penned late in his life, the secret of contemporary capitalism's power is its ability to dominate us at the level of our basic intersubjectivity. That is, at the level of our ability to perceive the "collective capacity" of humanity "to produce, care, and enjoy" (2018). Thus, instead of living this absolutely possible utopia here and now, our lives have been subsumed within its depressing facsimile.

For Fisher, crucially, life in the blackmail grip of this paradox has a brutal effect on the human mind, inducing a phenomenon called "hedonic depression" (2009). Following the philosopher Spinoza, Fisher contends that, by their nature, humans will tend to seek joy by means of any channel available to them. But the supply of such channels today is limited to those of a cheap and individualistic nature. Thus,

for example, we might seek to engage in politics by posting on various social media platforms. We might even become addicted to the hormonal surge of the "likes" we receive from such activity. But, as Fisher notes, the depressive aspect of this practice cannot be ignored. Our devices, and the media they serve us, all constitute a diversion from the real problem. We are perfectly aware, even as we seek this recognition from our friends on social media, that our activities are a poor substitute for the real thing. Thus, as Fisher puts it, "for the depressive, the habits of the former lifeworld now seem to be, precisely, a mode of playacting, a series of pantomime gestures ... there's no point, everything is a sham" (2013b).

## 5.3 Acid communism and "Le Retour"

But *Disco Elysium* is not just an "attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world." It is also an attempt to argue that the end of the world is the most fertile time for the birth of a new politics. Late in the game, the enigmatic Klaasje informs us about something called Le Retour. She describes it as an "event" and tells us it is "part urban myth—part political science." People are talking about it, she tells us, and they are saying "that it will happen soon—and that it will change everything." Our Rhetoric skill then tells us that while Klaasje herself might not be certain as to exactly when Le Retour will happen, she is genuinely confident that it will bring about "a self-governing Revachol." At this point, our Shivers chimes in somewhat cryptically to confirm that the prophesized event is indeed coming, and soon: "For Gloria ... Spring will come. Two more months. Maybe less. It's time."

The game's use of the term "Le Retour" as the name of this event evokes a contrast between the cancelled future of the undying mode of present-day capital and the creative possibilities of a communism to come. Exactly how Le Retour will change everything is not initially made clear but, later in the game, after the dramatic events of the Mercenary Tribunal, we witness a portent of its coming. For it appears that the homeless teenaged street artist Cindy the Skull has used her skill to create a large work of political art, known as an aero-graffito. Cindy, as we learned earlier from Steban, is an "ideological auxiliary" of the student communist reading group. Cindy has clearly painted this aero-graffito on the ground right outside the Whirling-in-Rags hostel, the very scene of the Tribunal, in the hope that it might be seen by the Coalition aerostatics that hover perpetually in the skies over the city. Symbolically, she has painted it in a mixture of "red-dyed" government-issue fuel oil and the blood of the union workers and mercenaries who died that day. The graffito reads "Un jour je serai de retour près de toi" ("One day I will return to your side"). Upon discovery of the aero-graffito, Kim observes that "in Revachol West, someone somewhere is always whispering about Le Retour." The flammable nature of the admixture means that Harry can set it on fire if he wishes to increase its visibility. Cindy's work in this sense invites prophetic interpretation. Later, Trant will tell us that Cindy's graffito is a quote from a poem by Lu Jiatun called "Mirova '82," about the return of the "Girl Child Communism."

Crucially, this kind of prophetic reverence for the potential of political art is also present in the work of Fisher. Indeed, as Watson (2022) writes, Fisher followed Marcuse and the Frankfurt School in his commitment to the idea that the anti-capitalist politics of our time must flow primarily from the realm of art. Admittedly, Fisher presented himself sometimes as a rationalist critic of postmodernism and cancel culture (2013a). Yet his defense of rationalism was mounted only insofar as it served as a more democratic way to approach to the question of technocratic development. Toward the end of his life, in the wake of the depressing defeat of the Corbyn moment, Fisher's attention shifted to the iconoclasm and counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. He called for "acid communism," a movement that could serve as "a counter-exorcism of the spectre of a world which could be free." While Fisher did not finish his project on acid communism before he died, its published fragments show him writing affectionately about the possibilities of a return to countercultural "consciousness raising" (2018).

Crucially, one key function of a Left embrace of the counterculture for Fisher would be to create a prophylactic against the worst tendencies of the old left. This is clear, for example, in his discussion of what he terms "the Harsh Leninist Superego" (2018). According to Freud, the superego is the cognitive function that tells us "whatever we do, it's never enough." As expressed in the left-wing movements of the past, says Fisher, the influence of the Harsh Leninist Superego can be observed in the tendency of revolutionary movements toward "militant ascesis." That is, a relentlessly self-disciplined commitment not only to the "revolutionary event" but also to "the means necessary to bring it about." Fisher here implies that the dogmatic fervor of past movements was not only alienating to ordinary people, but that it led to a kind of proletarian moral exceptionalism which, as in the account of the Gottwaldians, produced a form of Left *realpolitik* that could justify atrocities. Fisher's hesitation with Marx shines through in moments like this. Indeed, he cites Foucault here, who observed that the challenge of politics today is not so much to liberate mankind but to go beyond mankind, and "produce something that doesn't yet exist and about which we cannot know how and what it will be." In this same passage, Fisher also cites Michael Hardt, who suggests that whereas "the abolition of private property" is merely the *negational aspect* of communism, its positive project "is the autonomous production of humanity—a new humanity, a new seeing, a new thinking, a new loving."

To achieve this task of producing the new, Fisher claims, the left must first "regain the optimism of that Seventies moment." Optimism itself, of course, does not necessarily assure our success as we storm the gates. However, only a collective countercultural transformation will allow us to regain our confidence and defeat the little business ontology in our heads. To demonstrate the stake of the counterculture for the struggle, Fisher points to the famously nonlinear virtuosity of Miles Davis's on-stage performances and the "yearnings and dreamings" (2018a) it could awaken in the audience. He found similar purpose in the psychedelic music of the 1960s and the disco music of the 1970s. Disco was subversive from the start, he said, growing out of a kind of intersectional convergence of "a number of subjugated

groups ... gays, black people and women, and ... the working class" (Fisher 2018b). In this respect, disco marked the birth of a possibility for overcoming the rationalized self within the collectivity of dance as an invigorating form of collective anti-capitalist praxis and self-decommodification. Moreover, he claimed, disco was just the beginning. Its "template" would be taken up in various ways by "successive waves of dance music in the Eighties and Nineties, including house, techno, rave and garage." By allowing us to access the joyful nonlinearity of the dancefloor, these diverse forms of electronic music all provided a kind of training in noncapitalist forms of becoming.

Tragically, says Fisher, the countercultural potential of disco went unnoticed by the left, and it was co-opted ultimately by the forces of neoliberalism. Today, while memories of subversive dance floors still haunt us, "the hopes created by postwar electronica or by the euphoric dance music of the 1990s have evaporated—not only has the future not arrived, it no longer seems possible" (Fisher 2013b). In the world of *Disco Elysium*, however, the opportunity for a leftist disco counterculture is still very much alive. Taking on the task "Help ravers start a nightclub" is instructive in this respect. This task involves not only gaining permission to establish a nightclub in an old Dolorian church but also solving the mystery of the "isolary entroponetic anomaly," a tiny piece of the Pale that floats high up in the church's rafters. Of course, the Pale is normally only found at the edge of an isola. And, as Joyce will have previously informed us, untrained humans cannot withstand prolonged interactions with the Pale without becoming "over-radiated" by the past. In this respect, our discovery of a piece of the Pale in the church is a cause for alarm.

Much like the DCA, the Pale is an allegory for capitalist realism. More precisely, it is a way to "imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world." This is demonstrated in the Pale's capacity to subsume the very possibility of the new and void the exposed subject of any lingering sense of hope they might have for a better future. However, as we learn in the game, something about electronic music and the coming together of humans for the communal purpose of dancing seems to limit the power of the Pale. Indeed, once the nightclub is established in the old church and the sound of the Pale is channeled into Egg Head's mixing deck, Harry discovers that it is possible to "tame" the Pale. This causes the Noid to speculate that the church, built 380 years ago by settlers from Ubi Sunt, might even have been built specifically for the purpose of containing the Pale fragment. As an atheist, Noid considers religion itself to be highly problematic. Yet this does not stop him from speculating on the similarities between the collective nature of prayerful worship and rave culture. As he notes, historically, in those periods where the fragment was not contained, things went wrong for Revachol; the Antecentennial Revolution failed and entrepreneurial ventures like the DCA failed to get off the ground. Yet, when Harry "busts a move" under the anomaly, something unexpected happens. His dancing allows him to enter a trance-like state and commune with "La Revacholiere," the spirit of the city—and a sort of symbolic counter-spirit of the Innocence Dolores Dei, the murderous deity of humanist modernity itself. La Revacholière tells Harry that she needs him, the dandy detective, so she can stay

"on this earth." When Harry regains consciousness, Andre says, "[I]magine if we could do that ... with like a *thousand* people." The spirit of disco has now ostensibly demonstrated how, at the end of the world that is easier to imagine than the end of capitalism, the counterculture can turn the tables on the Pale. That is, how it can arrest the spread of capitalist realism and thereby set in motion Le Retour.

## 5.4 Conclusion: solution or symptom? Disco Dandy acid procedurality

Fisher's theory of acid communism thus constitutes a mythic underpinning for what goes without saying in *Disco Elysium*—namely that the counterculture can liberate us from a capitalist realism that has colonized the sphere of spontaneous human creativity. Crucially, however, *Disco Elysium* is also an *ironically* left-wing anti-capitalist computer game. Harry does not *need* to be a communist to reach the ending of the game or to even reach a "true" ending. The only notable changes that the development of in-game political ideologies can have on the game's ending are expressed in a small line of dialogue with the Phasmid and the final dialogue with Captain Pryce. By default, if Harry does not have any political leanings, the Phasmid will tell him, "That woman, turn away from the ruin. Turn and go *forward*," Whereas if Harry is a Communist, the Phasmid will add "do it for the working class." Conversely, the Phasmid will say "For all mankind" if Harry is a Moralist, "For Revachol" if he is a Fascist, and "For freedom" if he is an Ultra. Similarly, the default ending monologue with Pryce wraps up with "Harry's our man, he'll pull through." Yet the Communist Harry will hear the added line, "When he does, he'll side with the people," the Moralist Harry will hear "When he does, he'll side with the RCM," the Ultra Harry will hear "He's always been ... money over bitches," and the Fascist (as well as the neutral) Harry will hear "When he does, he'll side with Revachol." What these inflections mean for the ending is entirely left to the player's interpretation.

Yet this ideological fluidity raises a problem for an ostensibly left-wing computer game. If the development of Harry's political ideology has no effect on the ending of the game or, indeed, anything to do with the main story, then what is its point? One interpretation might be that political ideology, when engaged with on a superficial level as Harry often does, cannot be a catalyst for real political change. Yet another way to look at it is that, when living in a world like *Disco Elysium*, where capitalist realism reigns supreme, *any* counterculture can be used to rebel against the status quo. This is why the political specifics of the "Return" are also left vague; it is less important what the ideology is because the operative premise is that in order to shatter the atomizing mystique of capitalism's business ontology, all you ever really need is the counterculture itself.

Some, like Price (2022), have tried to resolve the vagueness of *Disco Elysium*'s political commitments by pointing to its "ethos of accumulation." This argument suggests that the game's true politics are to be found in its procedural commitment to the accumulation of objects and the way they model the dynamic nature of the

lifeworld, or the dynamic relationship between humans and objects. This is a good point for, as discussed in Introduction to this volume, Harry can gather an inordinate number of objects over the course of the game. Some, like tare, he can deposit for cash at the Frittte kiosk. Others, like items of clothing, can also be accumulated and sold, or retained and worn for the bonuses they offer to various dice roles, while others again, like various notes and old case files, can help Harry remember who he is and begin the process of overcoming the traumas of his past. However, making countercultural behavior part of the gameplay itself does not necessarily address the problem of Millennial fatalism in the game. This becomes clear once we pose the ethos of accumulation in Foucauldian terms, as an ethos of *dandyism*.

In his essay "What is Enlightenment?," Foucault discusses dandyism as an expression of the modern "ethos" itself (1984). That is, a regime of power predicated on an ever-reflexive subject which knows that its own unique way of relating to reality, or the limits of what is possible, is the very condition of possibility for its own political existence. In an attempt to explain the political implications of this "ontology of ourselves," Foucault establishes an opposition between two ideal-type critical relationships to modernity: namely that of the flâneur and that of the dandy. He begins by paraphrasing Baudelaire's description of the flâneur as one who adopts "the spectator's posture" (1984, 40). According to this description, the flâneur is kind of a narcissistic dropout—an aloof and cynical figure who refuses to engage with the social world around him. By contrast, the dandy is the figure who refuses the "blackmail" of having to be for or against modernity. Foucault observes that the dandy's ethos involves both ambition and acceptance of certain *limits* to that ambition. In this sense, the dandy is he who strives to take what is natural in the world, including his own self, and make it something more than what it was. His ethos "does not entail an annulling of reality, but a difficult interplay between the truth of what is real and the exercise of freedom" (1984, 41).

The dandy therefore seeks to change the world, albeit not in fundamental ways, by means of a tactically aesthetic approach to his own self. He is the ultimate entrepreneur of himself, who is compelled constantly to "invent himself" in relation to those limits with the goal of perfecting himself or at least to keep himself moving toward some sort of optimal state. Crucially, there are downsides to this. Foucault cites Baudelaire here, who believed that modern life forces its inhabitants to live intolerably. Thus, because the dandy is a man of modernity, always "hurrying," "searching," "solitary" and "ceaselessly journeying," he lives in an existentially harassed state of existence (1984, 40). Yet there is also a clear sense here that, however harassed he might be, the dandy's artful attitude toward himself is better than the sanctimonious universality of "humanism," where the nature of the man who must be free is always presupposed with no room left for difference. For Foucault, then, the dandy's ethos points toward a third option, between the dogmatism of the humanist and the passivity of the flâneur. Kant, of course, had argued that the critique of the self be limited to the public sphere, but what if no such limit were posited? What if, in fact, we embraced a mode of critical thinking

that was not hitched to any sort of universalized rationality? One that would see the necessary limits of reason prescribed by liberalism as merely "historical events"? For Foucault, it is the dandy, that harassed and restlessly entrepreneurial subject, who provides the model for this "undefined work of freedom."

As noted earlier, Fisher's acid communism sought to leverage countercultural activity as a means to restore the confidence of those subsumed by capitalism's business ontology while simultaneously avoiding the perils of the Harsh Leninist Superego's universalism. Crucially, Foucault's dandyism seems to thrust in the same direction:

> [T]he historical ontology of ourselves must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical. In fact we know from experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions.
>
> (1984, 46)

Note, however, that among these "dangerous traditions," Foucault lists a number of historical political movements that for him fall under the category of "humanism." These include Marxism, Fascism and Stalinism. Here, Foucault is giving an explicit articulation to the fear that was perhaps only implicit in Fisher's concept of the Harsh Leninist Superego—namely that the genealogy of proletarian moral exceptionalism can be traced back to the universalist imaginary of modernity itself. Like Fisher, Foucault seems to think that the slow, quotidian approach of a countercultural politics is the better way to go. The figure of the dandy matters thus not only because it points to the aesthetic nature of this non-universalizing approach, but because it reveals something about the Left today and its desire to learn from the sins of its old humanism. Calling for a "work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings" (1984, 47), it seems to go without saying for Foucault that dandyism can actually create the kinds of change that we wish to see in the world. In this sense, it obviates the need for proletarian exceptionalism and the kinds of atrocities that have historically accompanied it. Like Foucault, *Disco Elysium* believes that the end of the world allows us to imagine a dandyist counterculture that can put an end to capitalist realism *cheaply*, so to speak, sidestepping the difficult predicaments and choices that leftist movements of the past have been forced to reckon with.

Arguably, however, there is something lost in this account—namely the historical specificity of the Marxist project, and why it is not enough merely to be an anti-capitalist. As Cutrone (2023) and Carlebach (2019) note, the goal of Marxism was never to tear down the universalistic bourgeois society and replace it with a harsh illiberal superego founded on proletarian exceptionalism. Marx, seeing industrial capitalism as the harbinger of our liberation as a species, eschewed the purely negative critique of capitalism as reactionary. To the contrary, the goal of Marxist

politics is to recognize the contradictions of capitalism and the historical specificity of the struggle it unleashed and to work "immanently" to transcend them both. The difficulties encountered in the historic attempt to resolve these contradictions were the result not of proletarian illiberalism but rather of capitalism's systemic *need* to thwart and prevent the universalization of access to bourgeois rights.

Ironically, the one character in the game other than Dros the Deserter who seems to grasp all of this is the corporate Ultra, Joyce Messier. Deeply read in left-wing theory, Joyce is a critic of what she calls "infraculture," which she dismisses as a hypocritical teenage fantasy "with its own dress code vernacular." Crucially, whereas Colquhoun (2020) suggests that for Fisher "the establishment feared nothing more than the working-class becoming hippies," Joyce is the voice of the establishment who suggests that nothing could be further from the truth. For her, the aesthetic turn of the Left is nothing more than a symptom of the completeness of its defeat. As she notes, "young people who dye their hair funny and wear old people's clothes are stupid, and their little rebellion is self-defeating." Indeed, Joyce insists that the countercultural left represents merely another kind of universalism, albeit one of an *ad hoc* and comically self-denying nature. In this sense, as we talk to Joyce, we get the impression that she is calling out the game of *Disco Elysium* itself as a symptom of Millennial Left impotence. For it cannot be gainsaid that, in terms both of its culturally transgressive plot and its dandyist mode of gameplay, the game fetishizes the relegation of the left's relationship to the proletarian struggle.

Ultimately, *Disco Elysium* is emblematic of the fatalistic belief of the Millennial Left that capitalism can be defeated only at the end of the world—that is, under conditions of capitalist realism. For it is only then that the need for proletarian strategy is obviated and capitalism can be imagined as a problem of thought that can be resolved through countercultural strategy. Unaddressed here is the fact that the Millennial Left *must* take up capitalism as a cultural problem. For if it were to concede that capitalism is a problem not of thought but rather of political economy, it would no longer be able to sidestep the question of *why* bourgeois society is incapable of responding to its demands. Worse, it would no longer be able to avoid the question of its own inability to make a difference. Thus, while Joyce is a Thatcherite and a capitalist, she is not wrong. The Millennial Left's disavowal of political economy is a symptom, not of the weakness of capitalism, but rather of its own powerlessness when faced with the historically necessary task of resolving the contradictions of bourgeois society. Articulating magical theories of change in order to shift attention away from the problem of the basic impotence of the Left today, *Disco Elysium* actually exposes this unspoken fatalism. It is in this precise respect that the game might be read as helpfully returning our attention to the Marxist hypothesis.

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## Section three

# World order, liberalism and security in *Disco Elysium*

# 6 A real kerfuffle

## Sovereignty and intervention beyond the Pale in *Disco Elysium*

*James Gilley*

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### Introduction

The 2019 ZA/UM role-playing game (RPG) *Disco Elysium* presents a world and branching narrative structure that is fertile ground for explorations of political ideas in the realm of video games. Often hailed not only as one of the most political video games of all time, but also as a truly excellent example of the medium, *Disco Elysium* delves into a variety of themes that allow us as political scientists to examine our own world and thought catalog through the lens of fiction. Much like how good genre fiction can allow for a deeper study of the particular sociopolitical issues of our own time, the best video games can allow us to interrogate our own assumptions about how our own world works. If, in the words of Neal Stephenson, science fiction is the study of a place, a people and a technology, then *Disco Elysium* not only serves as an exemplar of the genre but also shows that the study of computer games is salient for political science. The idea of video games as art is a long-running trope, but if we are to take this statement seriously, we must begin to treat them as works worthy of dissection within the field of political science.

Among the interesting elements for study in *Disco Elysium*, especially in the context of International Relations, are questions of sovereignty and intervention. Taking place in a post-Monarchist and post-Communist failed city-state hidden behind the strange force of the Pale, the city of Revachol serves as a canvas to examine the place of international intervention within domestic political matters. The confluence of political forces, namely Monarchist-Fascism, Moralist Internationalism, Ultraliberalism and Communism, in a small and inherently isolated area presents an interesting reflection on the post-Soviet Estonian experience of the developers of the game, particularly the lead writer and designer Robert Kurvitz. The personal and political experiences of Kurvitz, including a bout with alcoholism and other self-destructive behaviors, deeply inform the actions and

attitudes of this game. While further research should examine the author's context and influence on the overall political content of the game, this work is more interested explicitly in the themes found in the story and setting of the game itself.

The central conflict of a murder/lynching investigation undertaken by the protagonist, Harrier "Harry" Du Bois and his partner Kim Kitsuragi, occurs in the entangled web of corporate and international intervention within a worker's strike in an impoverished and war-desolated region of Martinaise. Outside interventions abound from the neighborhood to the international levels. This creates tension within the story and interesting explorations of the concept of sovereignty. But several factors serve to complicate the already complicated structure of interventions and assaults of sovereignty. The first driving factor is the important but almost background idea of the Pale. This strange force surrounding the archipelago where Revachol is located enforces a toll on those who travel through it. Extended exposure to the Pale is known to cause mental instability, and generally the space of the Pale causes a breakdown in the laws of reality. Those who wish to intervene in the isola must travel through the Pale and accordingly might suffer from mental instability. This situation brings up additional costs to intervention that must be paid by those who wish to intervene.

The second major factor complicating the nature of sovereignty is the breakdown of the individual sanity of Harry, represented both within the narrative and perhaps more importantly via the in-game mechanic of the Thought Cabinet. Following a days-long episode of alcoholic debauchery, the game itself begins with Harry awakening to an epic hangover and having forgotten much of his own memory. Utilizing the nature of the game as an RPG, the primary mechanic for conflict resolution and character development is through the various portions of Harry's psyche becoming dominant within his personality and how he interacts with others. Additional "skills" can be acquired through the internalization of thoughts within the Thought Cabinet. These mechanics represent a man who is perhaps no longer occupying the primary agent role in his own life. If an individual is no longer capable of making their own decisions, then the very roots of sovereignty in a contemporary conception come into question.

These two interesting wrinkles into the nature of sovereignty, international intervention and a breakdown of personal agency serve as the core concepts from *Disco Elysium* that interrogate the real-world discourse of sovereignty. This chapter will focus on the former, direct assault on sovereignty, primarily keeping its focus on the "hard International Relations" as seen in *Disco Elysium*. To undertake this exploration of direct sovereignty interventions in *Disco Elysium*, the following steps will be taken: first a discussion about the very definition of sovereignty as it is currently understood and how it has evolved over time will take place. Second, the direct issue of how sovereignty is treated within *Disco Elysium* will be addressed. Third, the complicating factor of the Pale and how it influences the various assaults on sovereignty will come into the discussion. Some conclusions will be drawn and further candidates for serious treatment will be suggested.

## 6.1 Clarifying sovereignty: a very brief introduction

Sovereignty, both in the game and in the international system, is a key concept that makes the system function. Yet this crucial concept remains a contested term with an ever-evolving meaning. Martti Koskenniemi perhaps says it best in 2010: "It is as if there were some *excess* in sovereignty that resists being contained in any single technical vocabulary." Camilleri and Falk in 1992's *The End of Sovereignty* note that sovereignty "is a concept or claim about the way political power is or should be exercised" (1992, 11). From its earliest incarnations, sovereignty has dealt with the ability to make and uphold decisions. Like many basic and crucial concepts within the realm of International Relations, sovereignty has many different meanings and lacks a specificity, which makes discussion of the term more complicated. John Dewey, in discussing the Austinian concept of sovereignty, places it as the "single person of combination of persons which has the power of compelling the other members of the community to do exactly as it pleases" (Dewey 1894). Yet Dewey complicates this narrative by questioning where sovereignty is held within a democratic society: in those exercising the authority or in the general will of the people, as per Rousseau's concept of popular sovereignty. The three main concepts of sovereignty identified by Dewey are force, universality within a society as a whole and determinateness, representing three different aspects in tension with each other.

Stephen Krasner identifies four particular varieties of sovereignty in his 2001 book *Problematic Sovereignty*: interdependence sovereignty, domestic sovereignty, international legal sovereignty and Westphalian sovereignty (Krasner 2001, 2). Each of these conceptions of sovereignty comes under some sort of assault throughout the course of *Disco Elysium* and reveals the tensions within various aspects of sovereignty. Much like Dewey, Krasner identifies that these different varieties, or perhaps more accurately aspects, of sovereignty are problematically in tension with each other at all times. This tension led Krasner to conclude in an earlier 1996 work that the sovereignty concept is "mired in hopeless confusion." And yet sovereignty remains at the core of the international system.

It may be more useful not to think of sovereignty as a measurable empirical fact. Boli (2001) instead suggests that sovereignty is the theory of where ultimate authority rests, and is typically tied to both a polity and a state. In separating the state from the polity, Boli attempts to square the circle of where sovereignty rests in a society, disembedding the apparatus of the state from the polity that both directs and is governed by the state. Further expanding on this idea of sovereignty as theory of ultimate authority, Gillian Youngs in the 1997 collected volume *Reclaiming Sovereignty* argues that sovereignty is reliant on the overall political economic contexts of the world system and that the nature of hegemony will accordingly affect the very nature of sovereignty. If sovereignty changes based on the nature of the international system as dictated by the hegemonic political economic structures, then perhaps the concept of sovereignty as a theory of ultimate authority is a more useful conception of the state of politics than as a strict

definition. As explored in many of the previously mentioned works, the nature of sovereignty as it exists today is entirely contingent on history and the hegemonic structures of the international system. Davidson and Rees-Moog perhaps say it best: "Before the nation-state, it was difficult to enumerate precisely the number of sovereignties that existed in the world because they overlapped in complex ways and many varied forms of organization exercised power" (Davidson and Rees-Moog 1999).

Our current conception of sovereignty, in common usage, is best tied to the notion of the Westphalian nation-state system or Westphalian sovereignty. Emerging from the ashes of the Thirty Years War in 1648, this view centers the nation-state, itself an agglomeration of a set of peoples, a territory and an administrative entity as the core unit of the international system. The international geopolitical context leading to this reimagining of sovereignty saw the completion of a long, complex war of German principalities intervening in their neighbors' religious affiliations. Upon the war's conclusion, a new status quo was forged via the Treaty of Westphalia, which established a new conception of sovereignty within the international system. This Westphalian conception of sovereignty, colloquially envisioned as the billiard-ball world, sets the system of sovereignty as "one in which all states were equally independent of outside authority in the control of a territory and population" (Camilleri and Falk 1992, 22). Yet though there are international norms of sovereign state behavior, ultimately "[t]he exercise of sovereignty is limited by the realities of power within and between states" (Camilleri and Falk 1992, 29). Westphalian sovereignty within a state is inherently at tension with other sovereign actors predicated on power relationships, and throughout its history, the conception of Westphalian sovereignty has been violated both with and without the sanction of the international community.

Yet returning to Rousseau's conception of sovereignty as derived from the popular will via social contract, this suggests that it is indeed individuals that are ultimately sovereign. This Enlightenment Era departure from more traditional notions of God as sovereign over all sits at the very crux of the Social Contract (Rousseau 1762). Laura Brace, writing in the same 1997 collected volume mentioned earlier, builds on and interrogates this notion of the individual as the sovereign entity situated within a wider context. Brace's work, as well as the concept of sovereign individuals, will be explored in much greater detail later within the work at hand, as *Disco Elysium* challenges the boundaries of the individual given the necessity of rationality in exercising sovereignty.

Returning to Boli (2001), where sovereignty is located is then an open question. Various social theories attribute sovereignty to God, a monarch, a social elite, "the people," the law of constitution and so on. But in the modern conception, especially after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the state-centric version of Westphalian sovereignty seems to be collapsing back into individuals as the ultimate holders of sovereignty. Heller and Sofaer counter with the notion that state sovereignty has always coexisted with other values and conceptions of sovereignty. Brainard and Brinkerhoff (2006), ruminating within this debate and

examining it through the lens of the impact of the Coptic Diaspora's influence on domestic politics within Egypt, find that perhaps both a stronger state-centric sovereignty and individual sovereignty can be mutually supportive. This is further supported in Wotipka and Tsutsui (2008) through empirical study into state adoption of International Human Rights treaties. States appear to be willing to limit their own sovereignty in order to reinforce the rights of their citizens in response to both internal and international normative pressures. Sovereignty as a contested and evolving concept is perhaps best highlighted as a measure of control. If humans are incapable of exerting sovereignty through control, as pointed out by Wendt and Duvall (2008), then as in the case of dealing with unidentified flying objects (UFOs), states and individuals seek to place that which is ultimately a threat to control outside of the realm of human action. This final observation will become especially relevant when dealing with the concept of the Pale within *Disco Elysium*.

Before concluding this literature review, it should be noted that this is not the first attempt to use popular culture to interrogate the nature of sovereignty. In particular, the 2015 work by Neal Curtis' *Sovereignty and Superheroes* examines the intersection of superpowered individuals, the War on Terror and state sovereignty. Superheroes, in Curtis' view, are perhaps more reflective of the notion of God as sovereign, and the interactions between these gods and the state are important to understanding the flow of sovereignty. While for our purposes a more geopolitically oriented sovereignty is of concern, for Curtis, sovereignty takes a philosophical turn. The discussion of sovereignty and sanity through the lens of Harry perhaps fits best within this framework, though this discussion is outside the purview of this chapter. All these intersections of sovereignty come together to leave open the question about the fundamental nature of sovereignty itself. Its origins and ultimate resting place, as well as what sovereignty means in practice, are left unresolved in the face of superheroes. And perhaps this is the most realistic approach to sovereignty of all.

While this brief review of the literature only scratches the surface of the full debate and discourse concerning sovereignty, for our purposes within the context of this chapter, it should be clear that sovereignty is ultimately a contested concept. Most importantly the contestation occurs over where sovereignty is located. The largest takeaway should be that a singular definition of sovereignty will ultimately be incomplete and that perhaps the best we can do is to have a narrowly limited concept of sovereignty. For this chapter, that concept will emerge simply as ultimate decision-making authority. This conception of sovereignty will primarily focus on something more closely resembling a Westphalian version of sovereignty, one where a group of people will have control over the decision-making and administration of a territory through the institutions of a "Sovereign State." The rest of this paper will examine how *Disco Elysium* treats that authority, where it is limited, and how the new context of the game's world reveals interesting questions about sovereignty.

## 6.2 The dual nature of assaults on sovereignty in *Disco Elysium*

In *Disco Elysium*, assaults on sovereignty are both a key background element to the world-building of the game and constitute drivers of the central conflicts within the plot. Regardless of the approach taken in defining sovereignty, Revachol as a state and Harry as an actor within that state have both experienced severe infractions upon their ability to make and carry out decisions for themselves. Over the course of the game, it becomes clear that the nature of sovereignty is under assault from outside actors, internal forces and the nature of human psychology itself that undermines the ability to enact sovereignty as a coherent concept. If we treat sovereignty as the ability to make and enforce decisions, then sovereignty is fundamentally disrupted within the world of *Disco Elysium*. These disruptions to sovereignty come from two primary directions. The first is that of outside intervention within the domestic politics of Revachol. The second, and perhaps more interesting in the context of the game, is the internal disruption to Harry's individual sovereignty, and the larger implications that a lack of sovereignty in an individual might have for the wider concept.

This chapter will focus on the first, more direct assaults on sovereignty from a more traditional International Relations perspective. From a meta-gaming perspective, it should be noted that the very act of Harry being a character in a game whose decisions are directed by the player, is a very interesting critique of the nature of sovereignty as well. This point is very deserving of its own treatment, and will therefore also remain unaddressed within this chapter. Before moving on to address the nature and violations of sovereignty within *Disco Elysium*, it should be noted that an interesting fantastical wrinkle is added to questions of sovereignty. The Pale, a supernatural force that physically and psychologically divides the world of *Disco Elysium*, will be examined in its own section to follow.

The international system of Westphalian sovereignty, as it currently exists in our real world, is predicated on two simple rules: first, the institutions of the nation-state are the ultimate authorities in their own territories; and second, these sovereign nation-states should not seek to interfere in the internal political authority of other nation-states. These rules and norms surrounding the concept of Westphalian sovereignty emerged, as previously discussed earlier, from the historical and institutional context surrounding the end of the Thirty Years War. In the century preceding the Treaty of Westphalia, states would frequently violate the internal political coherence of other states, particularly to upend and change the religious order of those states. After the Westphalian system was crafted and solidified through further treaties, the strong norms of non-intervention in the internal politics of other states became established and reinforced. Although sovereignty violations remain a significant feature of the real-world international system, a purely might-makes-right system that is not respectful of state sovereignty is no longer the primary nature of the international system.

In contrast to the situation as it exists in our world, the world of *Disco Elysium* has less clearly defined norms and international rules surrounding national

sovereignty. The polite fiction of sovereignty that allows our international rules-based order to function does not appear to be in as strong a position within the international cultural currents of Revachol. While the larger world of *Disco Elysium* does include some gestures toward the concept of sovereignty, it appears that the norms of the system allow for a much larger role of international intervention. To a greater extent than our own world, the world of *Disco Elysium* appears to be organized, at the international systems level, as a Moralist international order predicated on what we might term liberal values, though significant differences between Moralism and liberalism do make themselves apparent throughout the course of the game. Their system, as revealed through the game, is predicated on several states working together to accomplish collectively agreed-upon centrist goals building on the Innocence of Dolores Dei. Dei, a central figure throughout the course of the game, is the founder of the humanist religion and state structure known as the Dolorian Church of Humanity, which provides a great deal of the moral and international norms that pervade the background of the game. The concept of collective security, a challenge to our real-world conception of sovereignty, appears to be much more prevalent within the Moralist order.

Several important institutions work together under the umbrella of the international institutional framework known as the Moral International, or Moralintern, to deal with the post-revolutionary and post-intervention phase of Revacholian life as experienced throughout the game. Of primary importance to the plot is the Coalition of Nations, an international alliance of four nations (Graad, Sur-la-Clef, Messina and Oranje) working together to overthrow the Revacholian communist revolution and replace it with market-oriented, though highly managed and controlled, institutions. The Coalition of Nations is itself an aggregate institution of several interlinked political economic entities. Taking primacy within this set of institutions is INSURCOM, the Insulindian Military Command, which organized the interventionist forces during the active conflict phase of the breaking of the communist revolution. INSURCOM, at the time of the events of *Disco Elysium*, played the role of coordinating logistics for the Coalition of Nations within Revachol. It is perhaps best to think of INSURCOM as the traditional occupational force of a post-intervention coalition. Of all the institutions that represent the assault on sovereignty as portrayed through the game, INSURCOM is perhaps the most recognizable in our world's own context.

INSURCOM occupies perhaps the most traditional and obvious analogue for sovereignty violations within both the game and our own world. Sovereignty violations are most often viewed through the lens of military intervention, particularly in one or more states crossing borders with military and geopolitical ends. Within *Disco Elysium*, INSURCOM represents this precise type of intervention. As a direct coalition of willing military forces who intervene in the internal political affairs of another nation, INSURCOM represents a use of military power to impose change on another state's internal politics. This intervention is not so much like our traditional view of military sovereignty violations, which is perhaps currently best represented by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Rather than a single-state

military violation, INSURCOM and *Disco Elysium* instead represent many of the other, less boldly brazen military interventions that have been observed throughout history.

INSURCOM appears more like a coalition of willing states which act in the name of collective security. The very concept of collective security, at the core of modern interpretations of the international liberal order, creates an interesting conundrum for Westphalian interpretations of sovereignty. Should several states agree that it is in the best interest of the international community, as well as the local population, an intervention using military force can be authorized. In the event that the states of the liberal order agree that, for the best interests of all involved, there should be a sovereignty violation, then that intervention is not itself a sovereignty violation. The concept of collective security has been, in many ways since its inception, simultaneously included in and troubling of the Westphalian conception of sovereignty. Such normative decisions about the nature of sovereignty in the international system reveal the ultimately contested nature of the concept of sovereignty. The intervention and violation of Revacholian sovereignty by INSURCOM fits this conception of a sovereignty violation in the guise of collective security quite neatly. We in the real world often admire the concept of collective security actions, going as far as to demand action in certain international political situations. By presenting a collective security operation from the perspective of the place that has experienced the sovereignty violation, *Disco Elysium* is able to hold up a mirror to our own actions and make us reflect on the polite fiction we have created regarding collective security interventions.

But that is only one aspect of undermined sovereignty that is explored within the game. While we in the international community seem to fixate on military and direct force-centered sovereignty violations, many other types of sovereignty violations can occur. These other less direct, but perhaps deeper violations of sovereignty are represented in the game through the guise of the other institutions of the Coalition of Nations. A more subtle and pernicious sovereignty violation occurs through the economic bodies of the Bank of the World and the Institute of Price Stabilité. The Bank of the World seeks to bring those under its jurisdiction in line with certain interventionist, market-based economic order. Separate from the purely market-oriented ideologies of the Ultraliberals, the Bank of the World seeks incremental change and control over the economic system. This banking institution breaks from what we would understand as Liberal economic orthodoxy, represented in-game via Ultraliberal ideology, and instead leans on a much more managed view of a market economy. It is this management of the economy that lends itself to a much greater sovereignty violation. While an Ultraliberal or real-world Classical Liberal might seek to intervene to install a free market system, this Bank of the World and the Moralintern seek to manage the economies where they are able to establish control.

Paired with the Institute of Price Stabilité, whose portfolio includes the control of inflation and the fostering of social stability, these two primarily economic institutions seek to dictate to Revachol their economic disposition. This fictional

dual mandate, in many ways reflecting real-world central bank dual mandates, allows for a much wider degree of intervention within the affairs of other states' political economies. Reflecting the real-world vision of something like the Bretton Woods system and the concept of a global economy as an interlinked market, the Institute of Price Stabilité seeks to expand its influence to all corners of the world. Yet in a departure from the real world, the nature of the intervention is less shock therapy and relies on an explicitly incrementalist approach. Under the incrementalist approach, the changes that are put into place require decades of intervention in the economy by outside actors. Much as a line can never truly approach an asymptote, the incrementalist approach is one that moves ever toward its preferred outcome yet can never reach the outcome itself. What appears to be action oriented toward progress ends up captured by institutional inertia that seeks to maintain control and relevance. It is this state of control that seems to be the goal of the intervention, with change in outcomes a distant second. Put bluntly, control is the point.

The inability to make one's own decisions about the pursuit of political economic affairs is arguably the greater assault on sovereignty represented in *Disco Elysium* and perhaps reveals the true mirror that is held up against violations of sovereignty in our own world. While we often portray sovereignty violations as explicitly military interventions, more subtle and pernicious violations occur routinely through economic interventions. If a state is no longer capable of making decisions about its own livelihood and how it goes about making that livelihood, then it cannot be said to be sovereign. The crafting of global trade systems and the attendant stipulations for nation-states to join these systems deeply constrain national political economic sovereignty. Economic intervention within *Disco Elysium* reveals the darker side of institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund-driven structural adjustments within our own world. Accession to the World Trade system of the West or acceptance of China's Belt and Road Initiative represents distinct limits on state sovereignty, as ultimate decision-making authority on economic matters, the core matters of a state's livelihood, is deeply restricted. And should a state not deliberately choose to opt-in to these systems, but instead be dragged in via either economic pressures or a more traditional military-centric sovereignty violation, then the economic sovereignty violation becomes all the more pernicious. Such is the case of the Moralintern in Revachol.

One further institution of the Coalition of Nations and the Moralintern that deeply violate not only Revacholian sovereignty but perhaps the sovereignty of all states within their purview is that of the Provisional Commission. The Provisional Commission is not, in fact, provisional but is instead an institution responsible for the management of contingency spreads. Within *Disco Elysium*, contingency spreads are a political economic technology that is capable of modeling outcomes in complex events. These are more advanced and influential versions of rational choice and complexity models, which are directly employed by the Coalition of Nations to direct not only their behavior but the behavior of those where they have

intervened. These contingency spreads serve not quite to predict the future but to give a probabilistic view into what it could be and are then employed to direct the actions of the Moralintern. This technology hands the ability to make decisions over to algorithms and pushes sovereign authority away from people, be they elites or the masses.

While the Provisional Commission lacks a true analogue in our own world, it does gesture toward some modern institutions and activities that could very clearly be seen as sovereignty violations. First, the general trend toward technocracy as opposed to more democratic forms of government sees a separation from sovereignty as tied to the consent of the governed. By obfuscating the decision-making process, a clear chain of sovereignty appears to become broken, something reflected in our own world. Additionally, this notion of management of contingency spreads, or the reduction of risks of probabilistic outcomes, certainly seems to be rooted in the real-world expansion of financialization. In *Disco Elysium*, financial principles of algorithmic risk management have been taken up by the Provisional Commission for almost all matters of public life. By trusting in a risk management-based worldview, much individual agency in ways of life can be taken away, replaced with the nudge of a paternalistic state that purports to know better than the individual what is best for that individual. In the end, it is perhaps this notion of the "rule by those who know better than you" that represents one of the most pernicious violations of sovereignty that is explored by *Disco Elysium*.

It is also worth mentioning one other institutional element of the Coalition of Nations which plays a role in reshaping Revachol. The Institute for Revacholian Culture seeks to foster cultural exchange between Revachol and the other nations of the Moralintern. Trant Heidelstam reveals that the institute exists to "export notable works of Revacholian culture throughout the Moralintern, while also importing the most important cultural products of the wider world to citizens of Revachol." In many ways, this is an explicit institution that seeks to spread the soft power of the Moralintern throughout Revachol. By deliberately introducing external culture into Revachol, the Moralintern could be seeking to remake society and culture, traditionally spheres viewed as inherently *sui generis* within a nation, into something more in accord with their culture. This notion of cultural sovereignty and its violation is worthy of deeper interrogation, but ultimately finds itself outside the purview of this chapter.

The Moralintern and the Coalition of Nations are perpetrators of significant sovereignty violations throughout the run up to, and the events of, *Disco Elysium*. Yet they do not view themselves as violators of sovereignty but instead as righteous interventionists in the name of collective security and Dolorian humanism. Perhaps the most revealing of insights into the institutions and ideologies of these sovereignty violators comes from one of the thoughts available in the Thought Cabinet, "The Kingdom of Conscience." This particular thought is prompted by the realization in Harry's mind:

> Democracy is coming to the Administrative Region. The ideals of Dolorian humanism are reinstating themselves. How can they not? These are the ideals of the Coalition and the Moralist International. Those guys are signal blue. And they're not only good—they're also powerful. What will it be like, once their nuanced plans have been realized?

Ultimately, it is resolved into the fully formed thought:

> The Kingdom of Conscience will be exactly as it is now. Moralists don't really *have* beliefs. Sometimes they stumble on one, like on a child's toy left on the carpet. The toy must be put away immediately. And the child reprimanded. Centrism isn't change—not even incremental change. It is *control*. Over yourself and the world. Exercise it. Look up at the sky, at the dark shapes of Coalition airships hanging there. Ask yourself: is there something sinister in moralism? And then answer: no. God is in his heaven. Everything is normal on Earth.

It is ultimately the search for control that guides the actions of the Moralintern. While the other ideologies of *Disco Elysium* have an end in mind, it is the Moralists who are perhaps the most interested in their direct assault on the concept of sovereignty. Their goal is not ideological, but is instead to control the actions of those around them. And in their minds, that includes the entirety of the world. Sovereignty is not a concept that appears to matter to the leaders of this international system, as they seek to incrementally change the world into their image—the image of centrism not as a politics of compromise but as centralism and central technocratic control. Although the Moralists often get interpreted as an analogue for the International Liberal order, perhaps something closer to a squishy version of technocratic Fascism is more correct. Indeed, the critique leveled through *Disco Elysium* may in fact be that the best of Liberal Internationalist intentions, at their core, may turn out as something more akin to a control-focused combination of state and market, all in service of an imagined and idealized greater good. Sovereignty, to the Moralists of *Disco Elysium*, serves merely as a speed bump on the road toward the goal of control for control's sake.

## 6.3 The problem of the Pale

The world as portrayed in *Disco Elysium* in many ways serves as a critical reflection of our own, but like all good genre fiction, it provides interesting wrinkles that allow us to step outside of ourselves and more clearly reflect on our own existence. One of the most interesting wrinkles applied to the concept of sovereignty within the ultimately fantastical world of *Disco Elysium* is a fundamental force of physics that separates the lands of the world from each other. The world of Elysium is vastly different than our own in tangible ways, most notably in that it contains no large contiguous landmasses but instead various islands that are separated not just by water, but also by a connective tissue known as the Pale. According to the character

Joyce Messier, a representative of the Ultraliberal political orientation as well as of the Wild Pines Group, the surface of the world is approximately 72% covered by the Pale. This in turn keeps all inhabitants of the world locked in in many significant ways. Long thought to be unending and impassable, it was only after seven repeated and unsuccessful attempts that a true transit of the Pale was made, resulting in the discovery of the archipelago of Insulinde. Special technology in the guise of the Pale latitude compressor is required to condense and give form to the Pale and thus make it passable. But a high toll is paid through the transit of the Pale, which makes the decision to violate sovereignty even more expensive than in our own world.

The Pale itself exposes travelers to high levels of radiation, and beyond comparatively simple radiation risks, it inflicts a toll on sanity. Strict limits are placed on those who travel through the Pale, with civilians limited to six days of travel per year, and professionals limited to twenty-two days of travel. Beyond physical travel through the Pale, communications via radio signals are also deeply constrained and costly, due to the need for special equipment and signal repeaters. Signals can often become mixed up and get misdelivered both in space as well as time. A late game encounter with what appears to be a cryptozoological being, the Insulindian Phasmid, reveals that the Pale is in fact a by-product of humanity itself, a physical manifestation of past information that is capable of degrading memories into itself.

Where this comes into interest for the examination of sovereignty within the game itself is via the extra costs imposed by traversing the Pale. With much mental preparation and physical costs to be paid by moving through the Pale, each nation in the world of *Disco Elysium* has a much more stable boundary protecting it from outside intervention. While some nations in our own world have physical borders, these borders are typically much more theoretical in nature and do not require great costs from every individual to transit. While there is a collectively acknowledged social fiction to each state's boundaries and sovereign authority, in *Disco Elysium* these boundaries come with much higher costs to infringe upon. It is interesting to note that in our own world, borders exist predominantly as collective fictions, but sovereignty is viewed as a much stronger reality. The opposite is the case in *Disco Elysium*. The Moralintern does not appear to strongly value the concept of sovereignty, but the costs to actually intervene in the actions of other states are distinctly higher.

In the context of our real-world international community, sovereignty and interconnectedness interact with each other in a familiar tension. Within our states, we seek to maintain our identity while also seeking to trade ideas and goods with other states. For the world of *Disco Elysium*, the very connective tissue of the world inflicts severe costs on those who wish to connect with others outside their own isola. It remains entirely unclear whether there even exists a singular world that is held together in any ways we could comprehend, as one of the significant scientific breakthroughs described in the game is the attempt to photograph the world from orbit. The heightened costs of intervention and the separation of the world by the Pale make the process of Insulindian intervention extraordinarily high.

These costs perhaps allow us to interrogate the costs that must be borne to intervene in the internal matters of other states within our own world. The very fact that intervention and interconnectedness take place within *Disco Elysium*, even with the added costs of the Pale, perhaps reveals a bias toward action and intervention that is inherent in human society. Our very human and modern need to control, as revealed through the Moralintern's action even accounting for the costs of the Pale, might override long-term thinking about costs. And much like the Pale, violating sovereignty can cause a toll in mental stability by dredging up and making real the past within the present.

## 6.4 Conclusion

In this early attempt to take video games seriously not only as art but also as fertile ground for research and reflection about our own world, *Disco Elysium* has proven itself to be an excellent lens for interrogating some of the more difficult-to-understand principles of International Relations. By placing complicated concepts into a new context, intriguing new elements of these concepts can be teased out and the boundaries of our current understanding of our political world can be more deeply explored. In this case, the contested term of sovereignty comes up for examination. While sovereignty has already been shown to be a feature of our international system that exists in a constant state of flux, *Disco Elysium* has allowed for a deeper disassembly and inspection of sovereignty as we understand it.

While not a concept that is directly in the main body of the plot, the nature of sovereignty serves as a strong background element that weaves its way through the events and setting of the game. And by placing our understanding of sovereignty into a new context, similar but very distinct from our own world, *Disco Elysium* enables us to view sovereignty in new ways. Three particular elements of sovereignty play a major role throughout *Disco Elysium*. First, in the most reflective of our own world, sovereignty is violated via an outside intervention into the domestic political affairs of a sovereign entity. *Disco Elysium*, through its Moralintern, makes us question if an intervention can ever be for a just cause or if intervention is itself about control. For *Disco Elysium*, the concept of sovereignty is nowhere near as strong of a tenet for International Relations. Yet power in a realist sense does not reign. It is instead control and centralism that drives international actions. This different context perhaps drags into the light some of the hidden elements of sovereignty in our own world.

Second, *Disco Elysium* drags us to the core of sovereignty and undermines the very foundations of our own understanding of the concept. Stretching beyond a simplistic take of military force intervention by one signal state, *Disco Elysium* presents the intervention as far deeper than just the military organization of INSURCOM. The Coalition of Nations, and more importantly, the Moralintern, violate sovereignty through economic interference. The incremental movement toward market, price stability and social stability reveals that sovereignty can be violated via more than strictly military methods. If sovereignty is understood as ultimate decision-making

authority, these decisions must be made along the full spectrum of political economic activity. Additionally, the nebulous role played by the Provisional Commission shows that the chain of sovereignty can be easily interrupted through obfuscatory technocratic institutions, perhaps reflecting how the increasing complexity of our own world makes it difficult for citizens to participate in their own governance.

Finally, the costs of sovereign intervention and interconnected societies are brought into clear focus by contrasting our world of sovereignty with that of the broken and isolated world of *Disco Elysium* and the Pale. By inflicting both material and mental costs on travelers, the Pale makes the costs of intervention much higher than in our own world. Yet while the costs, both individually and for interventionist groups, are increased, the overall concept of sovereignty as a whole is decreased. The tension in *Disco Elysium* between the Pale—a representation of the isolation that humans cause between each other—and the drive to control and intervene in the affairs of others as seen in the Moralintern allows us to more clearly question our fundamental concepts of the international system. As with any good piece of art, *Disco Elysium* reveals questions about our own reality that might not have been raised without taking a core concept and mapping it onto a new context. Such is the state of sovereignty as portrayed across the Insulindian archipelago through the eyes of a broken and weary policeman.

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# 7 The EU and *Disco Elysium*—second-order representations as vessels of criticism

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## Introduction

The 2019 critically acclaimed digital role-playing game *Disco Elysium* is set in Elysium, the fictional world that also serves as a setting for the novel *Sacred and Terrible Air* (*Püha ja õudne lõhn*) by the game's lead writer Robert Kurvitz (2013). Most of the events in the game happen in the Martinaise district of Revachol, the "disgraced former capital of the world divided into zones of control under foreign occupation—half a century after a failed world revolution." Revachol is a former constitutional monarchy that first experienced a communist revolution and then succumbed to foreign occupation by a coalition of economically neoliberal nations. It now exists in a state of economic recession, giving the brief disco days of economic boom that occurred two decades earlier a nostalgic glamour. Despite its nature as a fiction, however, the game also makes a number of seemingly intentional references to the post-Soviet experience and perspective of Eastern European states. In particular, aspects of the game's world-building evoke the hope and subsequent disillusionment of Estonia, where liberal economic reforms produced a precipitous decline in living standards and socioeconomic equality (see Raik 2003, 43–44).

This chapter focuses specifically on how *Disco Elysium* mirrors the European Union (EU) and its policies toward its eastern neighbors, presenting viewpoints that appear to resonate with real-world Eastern European perspectives. These elements might not be as immediately evident in the game when compared to, for example, its depiction of theoretical debates over ideologies like socialism and fascism. Nevertheless, in the game's imaginative depiction of Revachol, a city under occupation by the Coalition of Nations, there are a number of discursive elements that suggest allegorical connections with EU-related themes.

As Neumann and Nexon (2006) note, fictional works often contain "second-order representations" (7). Much of politics is about producing representations. When a politician gives a speech or when a news outlet reports political events, their narratives represent the political world and imbue it with certain meanings. These

kinds of representations can be thought of as "first-order representations" in the sense that they claim to be direct representations of the "real world" (7). Fictional narratives, by contrast, often represent elements of "real-world" social and political life through an imaginary layer. These are known as second-order representations. To borrow an example given by Neumann and Nexon, *Star Trek* can be seen to indirectly represent the Cold War, humanitarian interventions and so forth. These portrayals are politically significant not just in terms of what they represent however but also in terms of how they can shape audience expectations of how real-world political processes should unfold. In this way, the domain of popular culture, which includes computer games like *Disco Elysium*, is socially co-constitutive (6).

The game world of *Disco Elysium* incorporates many cognitively recognizable second-order representations of real-world political life. For example, there is a dialectical struggle of familiar ideologies, like communism, fascism and ultraliberalism (and moralism, but we will get back to that later). Moreover, the game's depictions of the economic hardships of the district of Martinaise, as well as the policies of the dockworker union and the Wild Pines Group corporation it strikes against, all bear resemblance to real-world socioeconomic life. Yet there are also political stakes to these second-order representations. Insofar as they frame real-world political and societal issues, they inevitably foreground certain aspects while downplaying or ignoring others, thereby investing them with non-neutral meanings.

This chapter discusses the game's second-order representations of not only the EU and Estonia but also Estonia's relationship with the Union. This focus is germane as many elements in the game echo discourses of Estonian and EU politics, as well as discourses of the politics of European integration. The fictional entities like EPIS, the Coalition of Nations and Moralist International appear all to have drawn inspiration in various ways from real-world international organizations, including the EU. And the game's narrative about the relationship these organizations have with Revachol can be seen to point to elements that have also been raised in academic literature about the EU's relationship with its Eastern member states and Member State Candidates.

A brief cautionary note is due here. While the goal of this chapter is to examine second-order representations of the EU and its policies in *Disco Elysium*, it cannot be gainsaid that, even in a symbolic sense, the violent destruction of the communist revolution and the subsequent occupation of Revachol by the Coalition of Nations in *Disco Elysium* is analogous neither to the restoration of Estonian independence from the Soviet Union in August 1991, following the "Singing Revolution," nor to its accession into the EU following a referendum in 2003.[1] However, the political production of representation can also be humorous. Humorous practices can defamiliarize the familiar and trouble power by witty exaggeration, doubling and playing with the unexpected (Malmvig 2022, 3–4). And, as we will see, in *Disco Elysium*, issues related to the EU and its policies, and post-Soviet Eastern Europe's relations with it, are often discussed through satirical and exaggerated depictions.

## 7.1 "First responsabilité, then stabilité, then prospérité": second-order representations of the EU

In the world of *Disco Elysium*, there is neither a continent called "Europe" nor any organization named the EU. Indeed, *Disco Elysium*'s world of "isolas" enveloped by "the Pale" is a fundamentally different place from our own familiar world of continents and oceans. However, many of the game's imaginary devices have characteristics that will render them recognizable even to politically unsophisticated players. In this respect, however mutated or twisted, these representational devices constitute more or less direct references to entities in the "real world" that share these characteristics. It is through gesturing to these shared qualities that the game constitutes these devices as second-order representations of real-world entities, thereby enabling it to offer speculative political commentaries on them.

The primary entities that serve as second-order representations of the real-world EU in *Disco Elysium* are the Coalition of Nations, the Moralintern and EPIS. Both the Coalition and EPIS share certain concrete aspects often associated with the EU. Whereas the Coalition resembles the EU in its intergovernmental sense as an organizations of states, EPIS is a bureaucratic arm of the Moralintern, working to implement its discursive vision in a technical sense. While the Moralintern is a more abstract organization, serving often in the game as a general catchall representing the "West," including the EU, NATO, the United States and the United Nations, EPIS is the organizational and bureaucratic aspect that most closely resembles the EU in *Disco Elysium*'s world-building.

As Charles Villedrouin, or Sunday Friend as he is referred to in the game's dialogue, tells Harry:

> EPIS is a very special program developed by the Moralintern to support certain Occidental nations. It began as a unified system of weights and measures, which proved to be a *wild* success. Nothing but kilograms and centimetres as far as the eye can see! It was *such* a wild success that we expanded it into an economic union for the processing of steel—another success.

This of course recalls the early history of European integration, which has its roots in the development of a single common market for coal and steel, the so-called European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). Sunday Friend adds that this new venture has been so successful that it has emboldened the Moralintern to seek to develop EPIS into a "supranational political alliance, the United States of Occident." In a tone similar to that of official EU discourses, Sunday Friend notes that member states of EPIS like Sur-la-Clef and Oranje measure high on "the Human Development and Freedom Index" and contribute significantly to EPIS's annual budget. The overall impression we get from this discussion is that EPIS has grown from its modest roots in economic cooperation into a major political power that sees itself as democratically and economically advanced compared to the rest of the world.

With its obsessive focus on technical regulations and standardization, EPIS is obviously intended as a parody of the EU. The stereotype of excessive EU regulation is well known even outside Europe. While often exaggerated, this stereotype does have its roots in the fact that the EU has produced a considerable amount of regulations of all kinds. The Union's ability to set regulations and standards has even been recognized as a significant form of global power, insofar as it allows the body to exert influence over the conduct of other actors around the world (see Bradford 2020). EPIS, similarly, with its focus on the standardization of weights and measures, shares the stereotype of an EU-style global regulator. If Harry observes that the barbell in the abandoned gym lacks collars and complains aloud about this being dangerous, his partner Kim Kitsuragi answers (perhaps sarcastically) that the removal of the collars would have been considered a violation of EPIS safety regulations had the gym still been in operation.

Another example of this trope of excessive control through standardization is the "Insitute of Price Stabilité." Sunday Friend tells Harry that he is a commissioner working for the Institute of Price Stabilité, an organization dedicated to maintaining precise control over inflation. This control ensures price stability, which is essential to maintaining a defined level of economic activity, which in turn is essential for maintaining an exact level of employment. All this in turn is essential, according to Sunday Friend, for ensuring social stability. Here, too, Sunday Friend's account appears to draw from actual terminology used by the EU. It should be noted, for example, that maintaining price stability is the primary objective of the real-world European System of Central Banks (European Union 2012, Protocol No 4, Article 2), an important EU institution.

Interestingly, Sunday Friend describes these various jurisdictional domains of EPIS and the Coalition in immense detail, all as a way of avoiding Harry's questions about the real nature of the plans and goals of his employers. Importantly, it is never made fully clear whether the Institute of Price Stabilité is an organization of the Coalition of Nations or of the Moralist International. When called out on the obliquity of his explanation ("You're not answering my questions at all"), Sunday Friend's answer parodies the EU's obsession with transparency:

> The Coalition believes in the importance of informing the public about the benefits of ze price stabilité. Transparency is one of our principles. Would you like an informational pamphlet? ... But oh! I don't have my leaflets on me today. That's too bad. You can always call our information line. Making information available is part of the Moralintern's commitment to transparency.

EU transparency initiatives are often presented as among the most advanced in the world and are elaborated with the explicit aim to act against the common perception of the supranational political system as being distant, technocratic, undemocratic and impenetrable (Kebel, Marx, and Navarro 2021, 222). The principle of transparency is often emphasized in EU discourses and indeed serves as a key answer to those who criticize the Union's democratic deficit. However, this

transparency is often understood in practice to be limited to specialized elites who know how to access and understand the institutions' technical documents. The right of ordinary citizens to such access is often de facto restricted by formalism and legalism (Hillebrandt 2021). Thus, a citizen without a legal educational background or access to expert analysis might feel some sympathy for Harry in his dealings with Sunday Friend; they are well aware of the EU's promise of access to information that is in practice very difficult to reach, let alone interpret.

Through the use of recognizable real-world terms, concepts and tropes, *Disco Elysium* anchors its depiction of EPIS and the Coalition administration to the EU. The mirror image of the Union offered in the game is one of complicated regulations and opaque technical policies restricting the agency of ordinary people. As we will see, however, while this institutional lore is interesting, it only scratches the surface of the game's critical insights on the EU and its relations with the citizens of Eastern European member states. To dig a little deeper, we must now turn to the question of Moralism and its connection to the concept of Normative Power Europe.

## 7.2 Moralism, the moralintern and normative power Europe

The Moralist International, or Moralintern, is the largest political organization in the world of *Disco Elysium*. Its exact nature, however, is somewhat elusive. Unlike the intergovernmental United Nations of our own world, the Moralintern is more like an ideological supergroup. Kim Kitsuragi describes it as a union of center-left and center-right parties. Sunday Friend calls it the international organization for moralists. Whatever it is, it is the main constitutive force behind the Coalition Government and EPIS, as well as most other intergovernmental organizations in the world.

Moralism is the ideological foundation of the Moralintern and thus also of the Coalition and EPIS. According to Sunday Friend, moralists "believe in a normal, stable world governed by democratic values." This framing of the moralist approach as rational and non-political is typical for moralist discourses in *Disco Elysium*. In keeping with this, the choices that tend to steer Harry toward moralism are often those that at least superficially appear the most reasonable or "normal" choice, eschewing, for example, any strong ideological stances or taking the middle road when presented with two strongly opposed opinions. Indeed, the player will make the fastest progress toward becoming a moralist by frequently selecting "none of the above," in the game's dialogue options. Again, according to Sunday Friend:

> Moralism is all about compromise and achieving the achievable. It's pragmatic, realistic, and level-headed, an ideology for *doers*.

This focus on pragmatism inclines moralists to favor free markets and the economic status quo. As Joyce Messier recounts, moralists "believe in keeping everything exactly the way it is." Somewhat cynically, she notes that they believe in "mineral rights" and not shooting people in the head, or at least not shooting them in the

same manner and volume as the others do. Still, perhaps the most critical description of moralism comes from Harry's own Kingdom of Conscience:

> Moralists don't really *have* beliefs. Sometimes they stumble on one, like on a child's toy left on the carpet. The toy must be put away immediately. And the child reprimanded. Centrism isn't change—not even incremental change. It is *control*. Over yourself and the world. Exercise it. Look up at the sky, at the dark shapes of Coalition airships hanging there. Ask yourself: is there something sinister in moralism? And then answer: no. God is in his heaven. Everything is normal on Earth.

However, the moralists do not describe themselves as amoral or without beliefs. On the contrary, their rhetoric attests to the fact that they ground their moral vision in pragmatism and rationality. Indeed, moralists tend to describe their organizations as principled and morally superior. For example, Sunday Friend makes a clear distinction between the "reasonably-sized superpowers" of EPIS and other morally inferior nations of the world. He contends that while EPIS members certainly have the power to exert influence over other nations, they only do it in the name of regional stability, adding, for instance, that Oranje is, after all, "a Moralintern nation, not some crazed Mesque petro-fascist state." Moralism thus sees itself as a bulwark for democracy, enabling peace and prosperity for all. Yet moralists are also no strangers to violence, a tendency that some critics find hypocritical. The Deserter, for example, an old supporter of the former communist movement, refers to the Moralintern as "the enemies of humanity."

Ian Manners (2002, 2006) famously argued that the EU is, or should develop into, a "normative power," that is, a force for promoting normative values in world politics. In this way, the EU as a normative power would differ from the traditional powers of the world, much like how the Sunday Friend claims the Moralintern nations differ from other states of the world of *Disco Elysium*. Crucially, academic discussion about the role and identity of the EU in the international system notwithstanding, the idea of the EU as a normative power has clearly been incorporated into the Union's self-identity (Diez 2005). Much like its second-order representations in *Disco Elysium*, the EU represents itself as a particular normative actor in its discourses.

Tuomas Forsberg (2011) has criticized Normative Power theory for its conceptual ambiguity. He points out that the concept of Normative Power in fact consists of several separate features: having a normative identity, having normative interests, behaving according to norms, possessing specific normative means of power and a record of achieving normative outcomes. Some or all of these aspects are often present in conceptualizations of the EU as a Normative Power but not necessarily distinguished from one another. Concerning these aspects, the second-order representation of the EU and its policies in *Disco Elysium* focuses attention especially on questions of normative identity and interests.

The normative identity of the EU is constructed on the idea that the internalized "postmodern" values in Europe, as well as the concept of European integration as a

peace project, set the EU apart from traditional great powers (Forsberg 2011, 1192). John Ruggie similarly argued in 1993 that the EU marked "the emergence of the first truly postmodern international political form" (Ruggie 1993, 140). While it is debatable whether the EU objectively satisfies these prerequisites, it is clear that the EU subjectively perceives itself as representing a normative power (Forsberg 2011, 1192). This normative self-identification is a prominent feature of the Union's official discourses, and its officials often note that the Union is a peaceful, value-based actor. As noted earlier, moralists in *Disco Elysium* like to make similar claims. While moralists and their organizations like the Coalition and EPIS are pragmatic, they also perceive themselves as different from traditional nation-states and seek to justify their actions in terms of the promotion of values like democracy and stability. Because these values are regarded as universal, the policies connected to them can be presented as technocratic and politically neutral.

A normative power is assumed to have different interests from traditional powers. Normative power is defined by its orientation toward the promotion of universal values, as well as wider "milieu goals," as opposed to the more selfish "possession goals" (Wolfers 1962, 67–80) that traditional powers tend to pursue. Yet the rhetoric of moralists like the Sunday Friend suggests that the normative power identity of the EU as being motivated by the common good is contestable. Indeed, the EU has itself also acknowledged on occasion that its principledness needs to be diluted with pragmatism. Perhaps the most compelling example of this tendency is the introduction of the concept of "principled pragmatism" as the key approach of the EU foreign policy in the Global Strategy (see Tocci 2017, 64–65). The strategy states that the Union should be guided by principles that "stem as much from a realistic assessment of the current strategic environment as from an idealistic aspiration to advance a better world" (EUGS 2016, 8). Thus, while EU authorities might maintain that principled pragmatism does not constitute a break with the Union's principles, it is easy to see how such discourses can be interpreted as indicating a kind of double standard.

Another aspect of normative power in Manners' (2002) work is connected to Galtung's ideological power—the power over ideas (239). Normative power in this sense is an ability to shape not only general rules and practices but conceptions of the "normal" itself in International Relations. As we have already noted, defining their preferred state of things as "normal" is recurring characteristic of the discourse of *Disco Elysium*'s moralists. The EU similarly shapes the internationally shared concept of "normal" through its regulatory power and through the use of what Nye (1990, 2004, 2008) terms "soft power," or the power of attraction that makes others want to follow the model of the actor. While the moralists of *Disco Elysium* are perhaps more forceful in the way they coerce others to accept their conception of the "normal," defining the "normal" is still an important part of their representation. Their claim of representing "reasonable" and "neutral" options to ideologies itself reflects a construction of their policies as *above* politics.

In *Disco Elysium*, claims for the moral superiority of the normative power are seen as hollow. *Disco Elysium*'s moralists and their organizations claim both to have a

special normative identity and to prioritize the pragmatic pursuit of normative interests. They do this by presenting their values as universal and their policies as technocratic, value-neutral solutions necessary for the common good. However, the game constantly calls these claims into question. Its second-order representation of the EU's Normative Power discourse is presented in a satirical way, the reality being much closer to traditional power politics and economic motives for those in power.

## 7.3 Structural foreign policy and the forced transformation of Revachol

There is a striking similarity between the one-sidedness of moralist agenda-setting concerning Revachol and the one-sidedness of the EU's normative policies. Haukkala, for example, has noted how the Union acts like a regional normative hegemon through its Neighborhood Policy (Haukkala 2008). Similarly, del Sarto has argued that by "normatively" transferring its rules and practices beyond its borders, the Union acts more like a "normative empire," primarily serving its own economic and security interests (del Sarto 2015). Haukkala argues that by denying any meaningful say to Eastern European neighbors in setting the normative agenda of its policies, the Neighbourhood Policy advances the EU's normative hegemony in the region. This is clear in the way the Union selectively offers and withholds economic benefits depending on the neighbors' ability and willingness to implement the Union's normative agenda (Haukkala 2008, 1612). Crucially, both the Coalition and the EU claim that their policies, even while coercive or pressurizing, are for the good of the target countries. These normatively justified transformative policies, one-sided in their agenda setting, bring us to the concept of structural foreign policy.

Structural foreign policy (Keukeleire 2003; Keukeleire and Delreux 2014) has been a key pillar of the EU's approach toward Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC), shaping its relations with membership candidates, as well as constituting an important element of the Union's overall foreign policy identity. Structural foreign policy differs from traditional "relational" conceptions of foreign policy. While relational foreign policy seeks to influence the external attitudes and behavior of other actors, focusing on the relations both with and between them, structural foreign policy aims at sustainably influencing or shaping internal political, legal, economic, social and security structures (Keukeleire and Delreux 2014, 27–30). As Smith (2011) elaborates, the prospect of enlargement has been the principal means by which the EU has tried to spread prosperity, democracy and security to the former communist countries of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, allowing it to establish norms for the domestic and international behavior of prospective members. In this sense, the EU appears as a transformative power, successfully soliciting change in the political and economic structures of other countries.

*Disco Elysium* seems to take a similar point of view, yet simplifies the second-order representation by exaggerating the discrepancy of power and coercive use of economic power into a military occupation and the actual use of coercive violence.

However, there are similarities between the depiction of the Coalition and EPIS policies toward other states, Revachol included, and interpretations where the EU's structural foreign policies, spreading its norms and extending its normative power in the world, are seen as actions of an empire. Some Eastern Europeans feel EU membership conditionalities are akin to a coercive or imperial form of power (del Sarto 2015; Zielonka 2006, 2008). This imperial pattern, according to Zielonka (2008), has been most pronounced in the EU's enlargement policy toward Central and Eastern Europe, where the enlargement has leveraged political and economic conditionalities to assert political and economic control over an unstable and impoverished area (476). Zielonka concedes that these post-communist countries were not conquered but joined the EU willingly, yet he draws attention to the uneven distribution of power between the EU and the candidate countries, thereby questioning the amount of actual freedom enjoyed by the prospective members in the negotiating process (476).

The EU, much like the Moralintern, the Coalition of Nations and EPIS in the game, often justifies its transformative policies with the promotion of democracy. Developing and consolidating democracy was established as one of the main objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy in the Treaty of Maastricht in 1993 and has remained a key element in the EU's foreign policy discourse, especially regarding neighborhood and enlargement policies. The forms of cooperation with the CEECs following the end of the Cold War were made conditional by the EU to political and economic reforms, with agreements and aid offered only to the countries that showed their commitment to democratization (Raik 2003, 48). Crucially, however, the official texts of the Union are vague on meaning of "democracy," and no direct answer is given to the question of what the EU promotes when it promotes democracy (Raik 2003, 48).

With its depiction of Revachol's reform process, *Disco Elysium* takes a critical point of view of the EU's promotion of democracy. While, according to Sunday Friend, the interim government of the Coalition is still working toward achieving full democracy in Revachol, the economic reforms have progressed rapidly. The result, as Joyce Messier describes it, has been the transformation of the Revacholian economy into a "laissez-faire stasis to the benefit of foreign capital." In this, the development of Revachol after the fall of the Commune mirrors post-communist development in Estonia, where the dramatic economic gains resulting from reforms were praised by European media yet also accompanied by a sharply widening gap between their economic winners and losers (Lagerspetz and Vogt 2013, 53–54). Quickly after the restoration of its independence in 1991, Estonia went through a series of rapid and radical economic and political reforms. During this "shock therapy" period, the government implemented a number of market liberalization measures, including rapid privatization, the elimination of state subsidies, strict monetary and budgetary policies, and the introduction of exceptionally liberal tax and trade policies (Raik 2003, 44). Western institutions offered glowing evaluations of Estonia's progress with these reforms despite their negative effects on social and regional inequalities, as well as the legitimacy of domestic political institutions

(Raik 2003, 44). Similarly, the representatives of the Moralintern and the Coalition in the game appear to be unburdened about the lack of democracy in Revachol, showing blatant disregard for their obvious societal consequences. What is most important to them, it seems, are economic reforms that give advantages to the capitalist elite of the Coalition.

Still, the Coalition claims that the democratization of Revachol is well on its way, regardless of the experience of the ordinary people. In a style that again mirrors the official discourses of the EU, Coalition Warship Archer tells Harry that Revachol's transition to democracy is "proceeding according to the appropriate timetable," with Revachol being in the first phase of democratization. However, it is made clear that the meaning of "democracy" is defined very much on the Coalition's terms. The Archer explains that eventually a "transitional advisory council" will be put in place to oversee the second phase of democratization. Revacholians may then be permitted to join one of several officially sanctioned political wings of the new body, representing "a wide spectrum of political thought." In reality, however, this "wide spectrum" appears to be of a limited nature:

> Typically, there's a liberal technocratic wing, a social democratic wing, and even a conservative populist wing. You wouldn't believe some of the ideas they express!

Thus, even as the Archer insists that this regime will be "a vibrant and free political culture" where "all perspectives be given a voice, even those many may find objectionable," it omits, for example, communism from the permitted list of ideologies. This is an especially notable absence given the high-profile role of communists in the game. In a similar fashion, the framing of democracy presented by the Coalition and the moralists in the game also downplays the importance of social inequalities in comparison to the economic development. In these ways, the Coalition defines democracy in a manner that echoes the limited framing of democracy sometimes used in connection to the concept of "liberal democracy."

It is easy to see how this all would correspond to the viewpoint of those parts of society that have not "won" in Eastern Europe's post-communist transition. Lagerspetz and Vogt (2013) observe that there is a high level of interest in politics despite the prevalence of a widespread distrust in political institutions. Moreover, they note that such "disillusioned form of political interest" is hardly exceptional among the East European countries (58). Disillusionment is also an overarching sentiment among the people of Revachol. And, much like in post-Soviet Estonia, this disillusionment stems from the experience of a democratization process where market reforms have taken priority over equality and societal issues. The reform of society installed by the Coalition in Revachol is presented as lagging behind in democratic aspects and leaning toward "ultraliberal" capitalism. This echoes the popular Estonian criticism toward the EU's criteria of democratization, which were seen to prioritize market reforms while ignoring concerns about increasing social cleavages, the alienation of citizens from the state and other social problems (see

Raik 2003). Lena Morell, the cryptozoologist's wife, bluntly summarizes the state of Revacholian democracy:

> We have no government of our own and what democracy we have is ... [she thinks] Market driven.

In this fashion, the forced transformation of Revachol evokes a critical commentary on the sorts of transformations that were demanded from post-communist Eastern European countries when they applied to join the Union. Raik (2003) notes how unemployed blue-collar workers and pensioners were among the social groups most negatively effected by Estonia's EU integration and that their experiences have left them embittered and disillusioned with the Union (186–87). In the eyes of a disappointed citizen, these transformations have prioritized economic reforms while neglecting democratic ones. Furthermore, instead of equally distributing prosperity, these economic reforms are seen as increasing social cleavages and problems, while the framing of what the promised "democracy" means is given from the outside. It is no wonder that these disappointed citizens would feel like outsiders in the EU, even after their country has passed the reforms necessary for Union membership. It is to this feeling of otherness and liminality, very much present in *Disco Elysium*'s Revachol, that we now turn.

## 7.4 Outsiders, policies of stigmatization and the liminal space

With its occupation, the Coalition has taken control of Revachol and imposed an exploitative capitalist economic order on the city. Harry's Encyclopedia skill informs him that the foundational laws governing human interaction in the Revachol Zone of Control, namely the Wayfarer, Emergency Trade and Ailments Acts, have been established by the Coalition to limit the authority of local institutions. According to Joyce Messier, it is these pieces of legislation that are keeping the city in the pro-capitalist "laissez-faire stasis" noted earlier. Legislatively then, Revachol is firmly in the control of the Coalition and the Moralintern.

However, while the Coalition has successfully steered the city away from communism toward laissez-faire neoliberalism, Revachol still has no representation within the Coalition or EPIS. Strangely, the Archer informs Harry that the Coalition has no interest in *running* Revachol, noting that "[w]e'll succeed in our mission the moment Revachol rejoins the international community as a sovereign democracy." Yet such aspirations do not seem to be a priority, at least in the near term, and the Coalition seems happy to control the city and steers its economic development, all while avoiding the need to take any responsibility for its social problems. Regarding the international community, Revachol thus exists in a liminal state imposed by the Coalition. Thus, as Harry's Rhetoric skill puts it while describing the Wayfarer Act:

> It's a law that keeps Revachol what it is—in limbo.

Sunday Friend tells Harry that Revachol is surely going to be a candidate member of EPIS one day. But in the same conversation, Harry can question whether candidate members of EPIS ever in fact become full members. Sunday Friend, of course, dismisses the implied criticism:

> No, no, candidate members *do* become members, why do we even have the whole system in place if they don't. It just takes time—time and evaluation.

However, Kedra, a candidate member of EPIS whose membership negotiations have been ongoing for several decades, is still an example of the opposite. Its brief description echoes the prolonged EU membership negotiations with Turkey, as well as disappointments experienced by the citizens of many Eastern European membership candidates about the slow progress of their countries' accession processes. Just as Turkey's quest for EU membership has faced politically motivated delays (Weisband et al. 2008), Kedra's EPIS membership is said to be "a more ... *contentious* issue." Even Sunday Friend, arguably the character in the game with the greatest inside knowledge about the workings of EPIS and the Coalition, believes that Kedra's EPIS membership is never going to happen despite its lengthy candidacy. This further underlines Revachol's own status as an outsider of EPIS and the Coalition that still remains under their control.

In depicting Revachol this way, the game highlights the liminal status of Eastern European EU newcomers. This aligns with Mälksoo (2010), who argues that new Eastern European members "have provided the Western European self with a constitutive foil-figure, with a liminal character that has been indispensable for knitting the EU together as a community" (43). Despite their formal accession to the Union, the dominant Western European narrative still frames these countries as "not quite European" outsiders. The upshot is a lingering sense of liminality that, according to Mälksoo, is still prevalent in countries like Poland and the three Baltic countries, despite having become full members of the Union (43).

While the EU is technically founded on an equality between member states, Krasnodębska (2021) suggests that there are clear hierarchies among them which, although often hidden, permit some to play a greater role in defining common policies than others. Krasnodebska notes further that, in the absence of other enforcement mechanisms, actors often use language imposing a particular idea of appropriate behavior and stigmatize actors that do not comply (228). This further strengthens the outsiders' experience of exclusion from decision-making in the Union.

Besides this informal mode of stigmatization, the membership process also includes formal mechanisms that work similarly. Raik (2003) notes that "[t]he position of a 'client' or 'pupil' of the EU has been a major source of annoyance in Estonia, which has reinforced the official aim to pursue membership as quickly as possible, in order to become a truly equal partner" (130). Many—if not all—of the Central and Eastern European member states of the EU have experienced a struggle for recognition (Krasnodebska 2021, 230), bolstering their shared sense of

ontological insecurity in relation to being accepted as part of the Union. Moreover, clearly, these experiences do not seem to end with the formal recognition of the country as a member state of the EU. Both Mälksoo (2010) and Krasnodębska (2021) argue that even after the membership has been achieved, this hierarchical relation has continued, even if only in an informal sense. The depictions of EPIS, Coalition and Moralintern in *Disco Elysium* all mirror Eastern European annoyance with this hierarchical relationship and the sense of an arrogant "West" looking down upon it.

Haukkala (2008) has argued that, in its neighborhood policy, the Union exercises its normative power as a form of domination, "[b]y denying its neighbors' calls for belonging and demanding that they nevertheless conform to its norms and values" (1612–1613). For Haukkala, this aspect distinguishes the Union's neighborhood policy from previous iterations of its enlargement policy. However, if one notes the experiences of liminality and the stigmatization of outsiders raised by Mälksoo and Krasnodebska, it is easy to see how the Union can be perceived as a self-dealing entity by those disappointed by their experiences in the integration process.

Depictions of backwardness in Coalition and Moralintern discourse about Revachol, combined with unquestioning portrayals of the civilized virtue of core EPIS countries, can be seen as a critical second-order representation of how Western European discourses stigmatize and set former communist countries apart in a ceaseless process of becoming a part of "normal" Europe while never being allowed fully to reach it (see Krasnodebska 2021). In this way, *Disco Elysium* can be seen as offering a counter-narrative, deconstructing the hegemonic power of Western Europe. Much like when parodying the typical transparency discourse of the EU, by representing the democratic requirements and evaluations of Moralintern and the Coalition in a questionable light, *Disco Elysium* uses recognizable second-order representations to criticize the Othering of Eastern Europe.

## 7.5 Conclusion

By placing recognizable allegories of the EU and recurring tropes of the Union's own discourses into its fictional world, *Disco Elysium* offers a critical, parodic portrayal of the EU and its policies, elements and typical discourses. As this chapter has discussed, EPIS, the Coalition of Nations and Moralist International all draw their inspiration from characteristics that are commonly associated with the EU. Some of these linkages to real-world discourses about the EU are more direct such as the description of the bureaucratic EPIS, while others are connected to more general identities and ideologies of the cultural and ideological "West," such as the idea of a pragmatically compromising Moralintern that nevertheless sees itself as morally superior. *Disco Elysium* reproduces many tropes familiar from popular and academic criticism of the EU and places them into its depiction of these three organizations.

The satirical depiction of the EU's policies through the depiction of a military occupation draws attention to the domineering aspects of the Union's use of normative and regulatory power as part of its structural foreign policy. The enlargement and neighborhood policies of the Union can be experienced as coercive

when they include strong conditionality and pressure, especially if one notes the Eastern European experience of liminality and inequality between member states, discussed by Krasnodebska (2021). From the perspective of those disappointed in their country's integration to the EU, the EU might appear to share some of the same oppressive qualities as the interisolary powers of *Disco Elysium*.

It is this disillusioned, disappointed experience of the integration process that is mirrored in the critical second-order representations of the EU in *Disco Elysium*. After all, as noted earlier, unilateral demands to conform to the Union's norms while being relegated to the liminal space of Europeanness are experiences shared by citizens of the newer Eastern member states. *Disco Elysium*'s depiction of a society experiencing such liminality while at the same time being forced to conform to norms of others presenting themselves as morally superior is thus recognizable as a critique of the Union's hegemonic position in Eastern Europe. Indeed, many of the characterizations and tropes that *Disco Elysium* uses in its second-order representations are those that can be encountered in critical commentary on the EU. In this way *Disco Elysium* can be seen as an attempt to look at the EU from the perspective of the losers of Eastern Europe's integration.

Many of the second-order elements examined in this chapter incorporate the typical criticism that is targeted at the Union in nonfictional discourses about the European integration project. Much like its fictional stand-ins in the world of Elysium, the EU is portrayed often by its critics as an overly bureaucratic form of government, an entity that simultaneously claims to aim for transparency while obfuscating its workings behind complicated bureaucracy and technical jargon. Critics of the Moralintern, similarly, focus on its pursuit of democratic and economic development in Revachol while in practice submitting the city to economic priorities of liberal capitalism at the expense of equality and welfare of citizens. Such sentiments echo critical responses to EU enlargement policies, which have been "repeatedly blamed for neglecting political and social factors at the cost of the economy" (Raik 2003, 90). There are also echoes between the way in which the citizens of Revachol are portrayed as lacking access to the decision-making institutions of the Coalition even as they are subjected to integration within its economy, and the liminality and outsiderness frequently experienced by the Eastern member states of the EU.

These critical second-order representations of the EU in the game can be seen to channel similar forms of disillusionment and disappointment to those experienced by Central and Eastern Europeans who aspired to join the "West" during the communist era, only to find that the reality was rather different from what they had hoped (Krasnodebska 2021, 236). In *Disco Elysium*, the unofficial motto of the Moralintern is "For a moment, there was hope." This also captures the expectation and disillusionment of previously communist countries in the wake of their integration into the EU. In this manner, *Disco Elysium* forms an important depiction of grassroots critical sentiments among those disappointed by what they perceive as the EU's failure to live up to its promises.

## Note

1. For brief description of the key events of Estonia's democratization and accession to EU, see (Raik 2003, 43–48). ⏎

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# 8 Who bears "la responsabilité?"

## The objective violence of liberal order in *Disco Elysium*

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### Introduction

Over the past forty years, the study of International Relations (IR) has entered a period of theoretical introspection, where many of the key assumptions about how international events occur or how they ought to be studied have been called into question. More recently, the theoretical turn toward culture and aesthetics in the discipline has been prompted by scholars looking beyond the traditionally social scientific boundaries of IR and toward both artistic objects and cultural theory for opportunities to expand both the ontological as well as epistemological scope of IR. One such avenue of research is into how video games express meaning as artistic mediums, particularly about their own political contexts or politics at large. As Ciută argues, "video games *are IR theory*" (Ciută 2016, 201), and games offer a kind of "everyday theorizing" that play with the rules of both fictional and real politics "as IR scholars know it, and crucially, as gamers also know it" (Ciută 2016, 202). The 2019 Estonian role-playing game *Disco Elysium* is a pertinent example of a video game that is consciously political and has developed a reputation for having weaved themes of labor militancy, revolutionary history and mental health in a capitalist economy into a murder mystery set in a fictional world. As such, it serves as a potentially interesting subject for aesthetic IR inquiry into video games and engagement with games studies literature in order to interpret how games translate meaning. Put in the context of Bogost's procedural rhetorics, *Disco Elysium* is a prime example of how the rules that govern the player's interaction with a game (and what a player actually does while playing it) express things as much as the other aesthetic dimensions of the narrative. Specifically, the way the player navigates the game world and the relationship between the player's skills and in-game dialogue both invite the player to critically examine different subject positions contending with the structural violence of a liberal capitalist order.

## 8.1 Procedurality

One way of understanding how games impart meaning is through the game studies concept of procedurality. As Kaltman argues, procedurality as a narrative term refers to the expressive use of computer processes as they are manipulated by users. According to Kaltman procedurality was derived from programming languages that allowed users to define the contours of what they wanted a machine to do or "understand how to organize instructions to solve specific problems" (Kaltman 2016, 370). As Kaltman points out, this way of understanding digital interactivity was taken up by literary approaches to digital media as a heuristic for understanding the possibilities of interactive narrative. Kaltman traces part of this appropriation to Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, where procedurality is one of the four principal characteristics of digital narrative environments that emphasize their interactive character. Citing the way the 1966 ELIZA experiment contextualized user inputs to formulate replies as an example, Murray highlights how the rules governing the program created a parody of a detached Rogerian therapist by focusing on keywords in a sentence rather than its overall meaning. The resulting illusion was "the result of Weizenbaum's adroitness in formulating rules of discourse that are based on the ways in which a therapist would behave" (Murray 1997, 73):

> By mirroring the artificial constraints of therapy talk, Eliza makes them ridiculous. Consider, for instance, the following exchange:
>
> *Eliza*: Tell me more about your family.
> *Patient*: My mother is very motherly.
> *Eliza*: Who else in your family is very motherly?
> *Patient*: I am very motherly.
> *Eliza*: Is it because you are very motherly that you came to see me?
> *Patient*: Do you need a mother?
> *Eliza*: We are discussing you, not me.
>
> Eliza will reflect back any "I am X" statement with a formulation like "Is it because you are X that you came to see me?" Here, the patient responds to the suggestion by playfully challenging the shrink. But, Eliza invokes her rule for *you* questions, redirecting the conversation back to the patient like any well-trained therapist. Putting these two rules together creates a coherent dramatic dialogue with a punch line. Such dialogues are easy to generate and irresistible to attempt. They amount to a kind of collaboratively written comedy skit. Few people would now perceive Eliza as a real psychotherapist. But as an improv partner, Eliza is still quite popular, available on most computer networks and sometimes sending a bill by e-mail after the session.
>
> (Murray 1997, 74)

For Kaltman, this conceptualization of the role rules and procedures play in coding forms a "core competency in designers and creators, a literacy of procedural power and systemic representational schemes" (Kaltman 2016, 371) that serves as useful method for both creating and deconstructing the representational dimensions of digital media.

It is from this framework of procedurality that Bogost analyzes video games as executors of processes analogous to real-world procedures. For Bogost procedural rhetorics are particularly appropriate for understanding video games since unlike other digital media that may use computer algorithms to make things (such as word processors or picture editing software), video games uniquely require computing machinery to exist. Bogost's understanding of video games via procedural rhetorics is particularly concerned with subjective and interpretive results of play. For Bogost, procedural representation is also characterized by the interactive opportunity a player has to explore the myriad ways a set of rules or constraints can be manipulated or reconfigured. In Bogost's own words:

> For example, many players and critics have celebrated Grand Theft Auto *III* (*GTAIII*) as a game that allows the player to "go anywhere, do anything." This sentiment is flawed for several reasons. First, the game does not actually allow the player to "do anything"; rather, in the words of one reviewer, "*GTAIII* let you do anything you wish, within the parameters of the game." The "parameters of the game" are made up of the processes it supports and excludes. For example, entering and exiting vehicles is afforded in *GTAIII*, but conversing with passersby is not (see Chapter 3 for more on this subject). This is not a limitation of the game, but rather the very way it becomes procedurally expressive. Second, the interactivity afforded by the game's coupling of player manipulations and gameplay effects is much narrower than the expressive space the game and the player subsequently create. The player performs a great deal of mental synthesis, filling the gap between subjectivity and game processes.
>
> (Bogost 2007, 43)

Bogost gives a possible example of what procedural rhetoric could describe in the hidden ideological underpinnings of political life. For instance, Bogost suggests that video games are examples of complex collections of computational processes that combine to create representations of the logic that drives political action. For Bogost the strict constraints that games like *America's Army* places on players that entail in game punishments for deviations from either the American Army's rules of engagement or the chain of command, the use of a persistent "honor" score to incentivize the completion of missions by those standards and the general lack of any particular geopolitical relevance to the missions players are expected to complete all contribute to underlining the portrayal of the American Army as an apolitical entity that rewards service for following orders rather than a moral

stance on a particular conflict (Bogost 2007, 75). This emphasis on the expressive power of procedurality in video games and what the interactions a player might actually have in a game might be trying to communicate is useful for breaking down how *Disco Elysium* deals with the structural violence of liberal order.

## 8.2 Violence

One way of contextualizing the procedural rhetorics at play in *Disco Elysium* is the way Žižek connects categories of subjective and objective violence. This line of inquiry is partly justified given that the game's head writer, Helen Hindpere, has cited Žižek as at least a rhetorical reference (which "doesn't perhaps come as a surprise") (Bentley 2021), but the influence of Žižek's connection between the structure of human psychology and society in *Disco Elysium* is also clear. In his book *Violence*, Žižek argues that violence as a social phenomenon is not reducible to its subjects or "that violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, [and] fanatical crowds" (Žižek 2008, 10). In fact, concerns with the immediate character of "subjective violence" more often than not mask the relationship between the subjects of violence and their structural or symbolic contexts. Following Marx, Žižek locates the structure of this context in the global character of capitalism and the way it shapes the material functioning of social life even while it is fundamentally removed from it. In line with his broader critique of ideology this distinction between the subjective and objective also cannot be easily reduced to the difference between a "real world" and an ideological veil, or "an ideological abstraction and that behind this abstraction there are real people and natural objects" (Žižek 2008, 12). Rather, for Žižek, what appears as an apparent abstraction is a real "objective" dimension of violence with very real consequences given that "the fate of whole strata of the population and sometimes of whole countries can be decided by the 'solipsistic' speculative dance of capital" (Žižek 2008, 12). The result is that visible subjectivized violence cannot be understood outside of the " 'objective', systemic, anonymous" (Žižek 2008, 12) violence of the global capitalist order:

> Hegel's fundamental rule is that "objective" excess—the direct reign of abstract universality which imposes its law "mechanically and with utter disregard for the concerned subject caught in its web"—is always supplemented by "subjective" excess—the irregular, arbitrary exercise of whims. An exemplary case of this interdependence is provided by Etienne Balibar, who distinguishes two opposite but complementary modes of excessive violence: the "ultra-objective" or systemic violence that is inherent in the social conditions of global capitalism, which involve the "automatic" creation of excluded and dispensable individuals from the homeless to the unemployed, and the "ultra-subjective" violence of newly emerging and/or religious, in short racist, "fundamentalisms."

(Žižek 2008, 13–14)

In this way, Žižek concretely criticizes the "liberal communist" tendency to personalize violence. The problem with lionizing Leopold II as a humanitarian is not any particular hypocrisy in his character as ruler of the Belgian Congo, but rather that the imperial system of conquest and extraction that created the Belgian Congo in the first place made its excesses basically a separate issue (Žižek 2008, 15).

In this sense, Žižek draws a clear continuity between the global social conditions of objective violence and the apparently distinct personal psychological dimensions of subjective violence. Where the latter is firmly contextualized in the former, Žižek argues that subjectivity then becomes wrapped up in the play of objective structural forces and gives the example of the looting in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. Beyond reductive (and often racist) explanations of an apparent breakdown in a civilized social order, the racially charged class tensions that Hurricane Katrina unveiled (and those very reductive explanations) also revealed the naked structures of power that define the different subjectivities at play and how they were meant to be dealt with. As Žižek points out, while looting did occur during the flooding (particularly of essential goods), many of the claims that New Orleans had descended into anarchy were largely unfounded or exaggerated. Nonetheless, the early panic about lawlessness had a directly material impact in that it shaped an overzealous approach from emergency services (particularly police) and civilian vigilantes alike (Žižek 2008, 99). Žižek ties these concerns to the exclusive structuring power of the global capitalist order, which despite its liberal trappings is underlined by the paradoxical "unconscious" of contemporary ideology. Despite the promise of the "end of history," the increasingly global "liberal world community" that emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War was belied by "the urge to raise new walls" (Žižek 2008, 102):

> A couple of years ago, an ominous decision of the European Union passed almost unnoticed: the plan to establish an all-European border police force to secure the isolation of Union territory and thus to prevent the influx of immigrants. *This* is the truth of globalization: the construction of new walls safeguarding prosperous Europe from the immigrant flood. One is tempted to resuscitate here the old Marxist "humanist" opposition of "relations between things" and "relations between persons": in the much-celebrated free circulation opened up by global capitalism, it is "things" (commodities) which freely circulate, while the circulation of "persons" is more and more controlled. We are not dealing now with "globalisation" as an unfinished project but with a true "dialectics of globalization": the segregation of the people *is* the reality of economic globalisation. This new racism of the developed is in a way much more brutal than the previous ones: its implicit legitimisation is neither naturalist (the "natural" superiority of the developed West) nor any longer culturalist (we in the West also want to preserve out cultural identity), but unabashed economic egotism. The fundamental divide is

> one between those included in the sphere of (relative) economic prosperity and those excluded from it.
>
> (Žižek 2008, 102)

Thus, for Žižek the pathologizing of the subjectivized violence that apparently exploded in New Orleans elides the broader objective violence of onlookers and local authorities who maintain "the internal wall within the US that separates the affluent from the ghettoised blacks" (Žižek 2008, 103). For Žižek, the easy expectation that, in the absence of civilized order, a majority Black public would essentially become feral was akin to a moment of Kantian sublime for those invested, where "[no] matter how brutal the vortex of the hurricane, it cannot disrupt the vortex of the capitalist dynamic" (Žižek 2008, 96).

## 8.3 Liberal order

In the context of IR, the exclusionary power of the objective violence Žižek details is clearly highlighted in critiques of the concept of liberal order despite its ambitions to institutionalize tolerance. In her critique of the works of Michael Ignatieff, Moorefield outlines a prominent example of the importance tolerance (and the clear limits to tolerance) plays in contemporary liberal thought. According to Moorefield, Ignatieff's account of the liberal part of a kind of post-Cold War liberal order is grounded in a minimal "negative toleration" that eschews concrete moral arguments for moral deliberation:

> Additionally, Ignatieff argues that this kind of vibrant and deliberative approach to political life requires no overarching humanist philosophy rooted in a celebratory embracement of human reason or virtue. Nor, he maintains, does this political vision need to be grounded in a spiritual respect for human life more generally. By Ignatieff 's lights, the "minimum condition for deliberating with another human being" is not respect for their capacity to reason but "merely negative toleration, a willingness to remain in the same room, listening to claims one doesn't like to hear, for the purpose of finding compromises that will keep conflicting claims from ending in irreparable harm to either side." In other words, endless justification and deliberation are morally good, for Ignatieff, and absolutely necessary for a liberal society to thrive, but such justification and deliberation require no more than the barest, limited, "negative toleration" of others to succeed.
>
> (Morefield 2014, 205)

Moorefield argues that this liberal tolerance is buttressed by a "humble humanism" based in empathy, which, for Ignatieff, served an important theoretical and methodological function in, for instance, analyzing the apparently atavistic ethnic nationalist obstacles to the liberal consensus in the 1990s. Ultimately, Ignatieff's

liberalism strives primarily to preserve individual agency and Berlinian negative freedom, for which the exercise of state power is necessary but controllable within a liberal-democratic framework (Morefield 2014, 206). Porter, meanwhile, outlines the way this liberal tradition has been expressed as a political order (at least as its defenders understood it by the 21st century). According to Porter, the liberal world order emerged out of the institutional arrangements put in place by an ascendant United States following the Second World War but was prefaced by Enlightenment political liberalism (namely Kant) and the interwar internationalism of the League of Nations (Porter 2020, 35). The creation of political organizations like the United Nations, military organizations like NATO and economic institutions like the WTO all served to buttress an American-led internationalism where

> many or all of the following features appear, though with varying emphasis: the rule of law and the supremacy of "rules", humanist globalism and humanitarian development, free trade, multilateral cooperation, and the security provision of the USA, principally through its permanent alliances, and a commitment to liberal progress through the advocacy of democratic and market reform.
>
> (Porter 2020, 36)

According to Porter, these features of contemporary liberal order are far from simply moral grandstanding and are not the work of "utopians, but hard-headed idealists" (Porter 2020, 37) willing to take advantage of a coercive American hegemony to lay the foundations for restrained, rational cooperation in an anarchic international environment.

As both Porter and Morefield point out, however, there are limits to the cooperative and tolerant principles of liberal order. For Porter, the coercion and violence that undergird liberal world-ordering are also clear despite its defenders focus "on the edifying, consensual side of world ordering, on its continuity and coherence, rather than on its interruptions, contradictions and killings" (Porter 2020, 36). According to Porter, the century-long project to institutionalize liberal cooperation that nonetheless acknowledges the utility of violence often elides the role illiberal means play in achieving liberal ends:

> In this milk toast version of the past, the darkness of history recedes. Only two wars are mentioned: the victorious world war of midcentury, mentioned as a book-end rather than a process, and another world war that wasn't. Other wars, also central to ordering, are pushed to the margins. Maximum emphasis lies on cooperative leadership and peaceable acts of creation. Minimal emphasis goes to coercion, to the point of near silence. On two frontiers, continental and then global, the rough power politics of history, from genocide of native Americans to the brutal struggles of the Cold War, are erased. Other possibilities go missing in action: that major war was averted by the terror of nuclear threat and still came close to erupting, that international institutions,

> the expansion of capital or aid programmes entrenched as well as alleviated poverty, or that deadly competition continued to define international politics. The rise of the USA is neatly simplified into a benign engineering project.
>
> (Porter 2020, 43)

Porter ultimately is not interested in criticizing liberalism as such and, in fact, readily concedes that "it was better for the world that America become the dominant power, rather than its totalitarian competitors" (Porter 2020, 5). As Morefield points out, however, these contradictions are a deeper problem for the liberal project than grappling more accurately with practicalities. According to Morefield, Ignatieff's articulation of post-Cold War liberalism reflected the contradictions of exercising power, particularly after 9/11. Beyond empathetically acknowledging the kind of violence apparently necessary for upholding the legal institutions of a liberal international order above any particular right of sovereignty (namely humanitarian interventions), Ignatieff goes further in embracing such violence as a necessary moral burden. Ultimately, Ignatieff's attempt to outline a universal moral tolerance ends up arguing for a consciously American "empire lite" willing to exercise the violence necessary to impose a liberal world (Morefield 2014, 208). This tragic burden-shouldering too easily glosses over the structural relationship between world-ordering and the various challenges it seeks to overcome:

> Likewise, Ignatieff admits that the American state might have aligned itself with some unsavory characters in the Middle East in the past, regimes that have "failed their people," but he is silent with regard to the role of the US in overthrowing democracies, arming friendly dictators, and in general, creating the very "disorder" that now keeps him up at night. The most egregious example of this selective amnesia can be found in *Empire Lite*, the second half of which is devoted to a discussion of NATO troops in Afghanistan. In his exhaustive rumination on the dangers posed by the Taliban to liberal society, Ignatieff fails to mention the origins of the Taliban in the Mujahidin of the 1980s, a group funded and armed by the United States.
>
> (Morefield 2014, 224)

Similarly, in outlining a realist critique of American foreign policy in the 21st century, Porter nonetheless also points out that the process of world-ordering is one filled with violent antagonisms that produce unintended consequences, right up to the Trump presidency "made possible by what he inherited from Obama, and the things Obama could not undo" (Porter 2020, 137). It is in this context that paying close attention to some of the mechanics at play in *Disco Elysium* reveals that the game invites players to reflect on how these structures of violence shape the political subjectivities of both themselves and the world around them.

## 8.4 Liberal order and Martinaise

The political context in which the player navigates the streets of Martinaise in *Disco Elysium*, meanwhile, is clearly and consciously one that plays on these contradictions in the concept (as well as reality) of "liberal order." The game's main setting of the city of Revachol is governed by an international coalition opposed to the Antecentennial Revolution, a worldwide communist uprising that toppled Revachol's monarchy roughly forty years prior to the start of the game. In the broader context of the game's setting, the NATO-like Coalition of Nations, which rules Revachol across different governance zones, is appropriately the military expression of an international order that closely resembles Porter's observations about liberal order, particularly the emphasis on humanism and democracy. Much of *Disco Elysium*'s known world is ruled by the Moralist International, a league of self-identified social and liberal democracies founded by the political (and essentially religious) movement surrounding the philosopher Dolores Dei. Credited as the patron of "the innocence of humanism, internationalism, and the welfare state," Dolores Dei is described as being the most famous "innocence," something of a secular in-game cross between the Pope and the Dalai Lama. As an "embodiment of the World Spirit," Dolores Dei's moralism is hinted at having a metaphysical origin (she is ultimately assassinated by a bodyguard convinced she isn't human) and is consequently invested with a sense of historical necessity as "what would have happened anyway, only accelerated, packed into decades instead of centuries." This sense of progress on a historical scale also speaks to the other side of Porter's description of liberal order as "order," eloquently described in ideas the player gets if they avoid committing to more overt political ideologies:

> The Kingdom of Conscience will be exactly as it is now. Moralists don't really *have* beliefs. Sometimes they stumble on one, like on a child's toy left on the carpet. The toy must be put away immediately. And the child reprimanded. Centrism isn't change—not even incremental change. It is *control*. Over yourself and the world. Exercise it. Look up at the sky, at the dark shapes of Coalition airships hanging there. Ask yourself: is there something sinister in moralism? And then answer: no. God is in his heaven. Everything is normal on Earth.

As encountered in the game, the direct effect of the Coalition of Nations in restructuring the economy and society of Revachol on moralist lines is nonetheless also an ordering process. The player's own role in the game is playing as a member of one of the few local institutions of governance supported by Coalition rule, namely a police force. World-spanning corporations hire mercenary death squads to break up strikes, thanks to an enforced free-market regime, and Dolores Dei's own career was marred by violent campaigns to reintegrate dissenters to the rapid pace of change (the bodyguard who assassinates her was also a member of the innocence's secret police).

It is in this context of understanding particular instances of subjective violence arising out of the context of structuring objective violence, and of liberal order being one such objective form of violence, that how one actually plays *Disco Elysium* procedurally reveals some telling things about the way subjectivity is shaped by objective violence, all through game mechanics. In one sense this is reflected in the player's exploration of the game world, both the immediate map of Martinaise and the pieces of the broader world of Elysium they discover throughout the murder investigation that ostensibly forms the main thrust of the game. As the player makes their way through the neighborhood of Revachol, it gradually becomes apparent that while the rest of the city may have recovered since the Antecentennial Revolution and benefitted from being governed Berlin-like by the explicitly liberal Coalition of Nations, Martinaise still bears the scars of having been invaded and occupied forty years prior to the game's events. The neighborhood is frequently described as being pockmarked by bullet holes and craters left over from shelling, and the bay is dominated by an abandoned fortress the player visits at the end of the game. Throughout their investigation, players can also find themselves in long-disused tunnels and hidden emplacements under Martinaise dug by revolutionaries, with one red herring in the mystery being an antique rifle pulled from an old cache of weapons left over by communist militias. There are some obvious ways in which this game world captures the relationship between the blow-up of subjective violence and its total objective context, namely in the lingering communist soldier who commits the murder that sets the whole events of the game in motion. However, Martinaise and its fictional history play another role in helping to shape how the player approaches politics, namely in the way this history is uncovered through exploring the map. Aside from the perspectives of particular characters with their own agendas (including a bitter old communard they meet at the end of the game), for the most part what players are made to think of this geography is left largely up to them. Exploring Martinaise leads the player to confront and interpret the violence required to make whatever Revachol is now the way it is. One poignant example is when the player comes across what they can discern as an execution site but can only speculate as to who did the killing or dying. They can make out bullet holes in a wall at a consistent height and can potentially connect the shooting to the corporate office the wall is a part of, but ultimately there is no way to know definitively. This marks another feature in a map full of potential stories like this, and given that the player can be told of the millions killed on both sides, they are left with a kind of mute presence in the map of Martinaise that they alone can make sense of. Whether that sense-making means solving the mystery of the game and returning to their job as a police officer or aligning themselves with a nascent union uprising with all its attendant corruption and violence isn't predetermined but is clearly entwined with how the player interprets what they discover throughout the game.

In addition to the legacy of the violence of a revolution, the game space of Martinaise also bears the scars of being subjected to a decades-long economic readjustment program imposed by its ardently liberal occupying governors. While

discovering Martinaise's history through exploring its map offers an opportunity for the player to reflect on their relationship to the world of the game, discovering much of Martinaise's present through exploring the map colors much of how the player relates to the other characters inhabiting it. Martinaise is generally depressed, with little going on in terms of work besides a dock owned by an international corporation and the handful of businesses that line the ill-maintained main street, many of which are also chains. On the other side of a bay, a community of fisherpeople live in a small huddle of shacks where children are raised in poverty, beyond which lies an abandoned church, corporate office and boardwalk. As a murder mystery at its heart, *Disco Elysium* is populated with shady characters meant to mislead or obstruct the player's progress through the game but are nonetheless ultimately contextualized by the effects of a social order that incentivizes their two-facedness. The first character the player meets is a laconic femme fatale whose lies about her identity drive the plot, but are also implied to be driven by being a disaffected corporate spy on the run from the powers that be. What immediately appears to be a menacing young lady turns out to be a poor artist in search of inspiration once the player makes their way up from the street level to the furnace room she's squatting in. The entrepreneurial proprietor of the book store with apparently little patience for anything beyond commerce (including the well-being of her daughter) is revealed to be incredibly superstitious and terrified of a haunted door the player can find at the back of her shop. Beyond that door, the haunting turns out to be the remaining assets of a defunct video game company that had long gone bankrupt after pursuing an increasingly ambitious project that overran equally ambitious funding. One of the clearest examples of this relationship between exploration and the subjective violence of particular characters, however, is Cuno and his companion Cunoesse. A pair of foul-mouthed children who live in the dilapidated tenement buildings that look over the courtyard where the player initially finds the murder victim, the player encounters Cuno as an obstacle to their investigation. The player meets Cuno throwing rocks at the body and answers almost all attempts at communication with comically exaggerated profanity to seemingly bait the player (who takes the role of an adult man) to hit them, while Cunoesse differs only by swearing partly in Finnish. As the player uncovers more of the game's story and crucially locations on the map, it becomes both easier to speak with Cuno and readily apparent that they are both the product of an intensely abusive upbringing framed by abject poverty. Part of reaching Cuno can involve finding the ramshackle hut he lives in, and the drugs he both consumes and sells, and can eventually lead to finding the decrepit apartment he shares with his physically abusive (and also drug-addicted) father. The result is that the relationship the player maintains with the pair can change over the course of the game, as becoming more familiar with the landscape of Martinaise and the stark trauma of its economic downturn make Cuno's abrasive attitude make more and more sense.

## 8.5 Liberal violence and Harry Du Bois

However, the foremost example of how *Disco Elysium* procedurally interrogates political subjectivities and violence is through its dialogue system and the way it interacts with the skills the player uses to interact with the world. While the game world of Martinaise allows the player to explore and interact with a community responding in a range of destructive ways to a legacy of violence imposed by a liberal political and economic order, the chaos that surrounds the player is mirrored by the chaos going on in their character's head. *Disco Elysium*'s protagonist, Harrier Du Bois, begins the game as a virtual amnesiac, and as Vella and Cielecka point out, the mystery of the game is as much about figuring out who Harry is as it is about who committed the murder they are supposed to be solving (Vella and Cielecka 2021, 96). Ultimately, the player discovers that Harrier induced the amnesia on himself through a days-long bender that effectively obliterated his personality and allows for the game's role-playing openness toward building a character. For Vella and Cielecka, the result constitutes what they call a polyphonic subjectivity as the player experiments with turning Harrier into different (even contradictory) kinds of people through dialogue options (Vella and Cielecka 2021, 99). The fractured and unstable subjectivity the player exercises through Harrier goes beyond his conversations with other characters, however, as a good deal of the dialogue in *Disco Elysium* takes place entirely in his head. Like many similar role-playing games, the player builds Harrier's capacity to interact with the world by putting points into general attributes (intellect, psyche, physique, motorics) that are subsequently divided into six skills (logic and rhetoric for intellect, endurance and pain threshold for physique, and so on). Beyond their traditional role as numbers that allow Harrier to do things in the game, however, it becomes immediately obvious to the player that each of the twenty-four skills is speaking character of its own who will regularly chime in on events as voices only he can hear. Like the unusual but tragic character of Martinaise and its inhabitants, the unconventional (and potentially extremely uncomfortable, particularly for Harrier's long-suffering partner Lt. Kitsuragi) character that the player spends the game with is also contextualized by the social decay of the liberal capitalist regime in Revachol. As Vella and Cielecka point out, one of Harry's arcs involves overcoming the personal tragedies of a divorce and the stress of work slowly eroding his mind. At the end of the game, Harrier is confronted by police officers from his unit who have been monitoring him since his mental breakdown, one of whom explains Harrier's mental state as a direct product of his experience with the society around him:

> "Well—here is my theory: What if this is an absolutely normal reaction to the world we're living in? What if this is *not* a significant anomaly at all, something to be explained, approached as a defect? Look at the sensory input here." He gestures toward the scenery.
>
> "Look at the ruins, the neon, listen to the radio, the multitudes. The people. Live here for forty years... . As a police detective, he's like a

magnetic reader on the world-tape—to borrow a known metaphor. Harry's been pushed *flat against it*. Total input."

"Hard-wired to the free market ..." He nods confidently. "He just needed for it to end."

In this sense, the dialogue and skill system allow the player to navigate a deeply fractured subjectivity and the social context that frames it. As Harrier can succinctly put it, "Capitalism. Capitalism fucked me beyond all recognition. Trant is right."

## 8.6 Conclusion

In its treatment of political themes, *Disco Elysium* is an interesting case study for how aesthetic IR interventions can take advantage of work in the fields of game studies to think about video games and what they have to say on their own terms. Framed by Bogost's procedural rhetorics, the way the player interacts with particular mechanics of the game (namely exploration of the map and the interplay between skills and dialogue) invites players to reflect on how different political subjectivities are formed by the structural violence required to impose liberal order. While the critique of liberal violence in *Disco Elysium* is ruthless, it is important to note that the game nonetheless preserves the integrity of ludic interpretation by foregrounding player agency; not only is the player given a wide latitude in picking through Martinaise's nooks and crannies for clues (and consequently pulling back the layers of its history), they also have different avenues for responding to the urban decay around them. As Vella and Cielecka point out, compared to similar games about an amnesiac protagonist's journey of self-discovery like Black Isle's 1997 RPG *Planescape: Torment*, the process of putting Harry back together has no clear "final triumph of the unified self" at its conclusion. Where *Planescape*'s Nameless One ends the game (in its "best ending") by paying for his crimes after reconciling himself to his past identities (reflected mechanically by the player's choices being tracked on the *Dungeons & Dragons* alignment scale), *Disco Elysium*'s is more open-ended (Vella and Cielecka 2021, 102). The player "can" recover Harry's lost name, badge and gun, solve the case and return to their old job with lessons learned. However, the broken world of *Disco Elysium* (and its attendant mechanics of exploration) clearly resists this neat ending as its only narrative arc, particularly with regard to politics. While Harry can respond to the violence around him by becoming an ardent communist, this is by no means a foregone conclusion of playing the game as they can just as easily internalize what has happened to Revachol as a xenophobic fascist, a sympathetic moralist or even reject an overt political alignment altogether. Rather than treating the horizons of Revachol's past and present as the historical necessity Dolores Dei (and no shortage of contemporary advocates of liberal order) made it to be as a matter of gameplay *Disco Elysium* offers a polyphony of interpretations and approaches that affirm the possibility of alternatives to liberal order as much as critique it, all in a way largely unique to

video games. By exploring both the game world and the psychodrama of the main character, players get the opportunity to ask questions about how the misery they witness in the characters around them is contextualized by the broader political conditions they live in, and ask questions about what an appropriate reaction to those conditions in their own behavior might be.

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# 9 Imaginaries of ontological (in)security in *Disco Elysium*

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## Introduction

*Disco Elysium* (DE) is unusually replete with political themes and imaginaries in the genre of digital role-playing games (RPG). As such, it can even be viewed as a satirical simulator for political ideologies and philosophies. Accordingly, its creators have inoculated the game from the type of analyses performed in this volume through their ironic takes on most things whether political, artistic or cultural. Indeed, already my first playthrough without an active research agenda gave me a sense that the writers were trolling, or at least poking fun at the academic readings that were undoubtedly forthcoming, like the protagonist doing a political reading of a broken coffee cup in a trash container. This was also part of the charm of the game. Still, I believe there is more to the game than just its funny nihilism and the leftist melancholy infused into it throughout *à la* Adorno and Horkheimer.

The game's narratives, characters, world and viewpoints can be analyzed in terms of political imaginaries (like reading that coffee cup), and accordingly, that is the way I approach the game in the present chapter. Such imaginaries are a core part of the gaming experience, as the player can choose the type of role the protagonist has in the story through choosing what kind of a person he becomes, as well as through how he sees the world around him. This allows for experimentation with how the world reacts to different positionalities, which is the "ideology simulator" part of the game that comes perhaps closest to an adventure game which has RPG elements in it within the genres or types of video games. As a departure from the adventure game genre though, there is an element of uncertainty that is produced through the game mechanic of skill checks and the use of unreliable narrators in the form of the "inner voices," or personality traits of the protagonist. Such constitutive elements of the protagonist's personal character are not as strong in most video game RPGs where players' behaviors are mainly interpreted as "good" or "bad" in a much less elaborate manner (e.g., in games like the Mass Effect franchise). DE also tries to get the player to immerse in the situation and role of the protagonist in the fictional

situation more fully than in most other single-player digital RPGs by making it possible to retry most skill checks without "save scumming."

Overall, some of the political imaginaries of the game are quite archetypical, even though there are features that are quite in line with some of the most contemporary trends in political philosophy and activism. The structure of how playing the game is organized makes it particularly effective in allowing the player to experiment with different political ideologies (in the form of political vision quests for a communist, fascist, ultraliberal or moralist) and to see how the world reacts to choices made in accordance with them. The game also keeps the player in an uncertain position in many ways, as the game mechanics are not fully transparent, and the common strategy of maximizing some abilities or skills in favor of others may result in the "inner voices" that narrate the world for the player to fool the player in regard to what is actually happening. Even this feature of the game can be read in terms of political imaginaries, as one approach to ideology is that it represents false consciousness, whereby the more you rely on a particular ideology or ability, the more thorough the falseness of your consciousness becomes.

The inner voices fabulate (Hongisto 2011, 90) the world for the player by providing fragmented interpretations and viewpoints on it and how the protagonist feels about it. How the player distributes their experience points among the voices affects how they appropriate and silence the fragments of the world. It is also not always clear whether a success or failure in a check represents an accurate interpretation of the world or the situation in it. The inner voices also differ in the degree to which they seek security, as some are outright self-destructive. Overall, fabulation takes place when a character in a story begins to "make fiction" and thereby contributes to the invention of a "people." This works to envision a collectivity beyond that which exists in actuality. In essence, the inner voices fabulate the world for both the protagonist and the player.

Accordingly, my reading of the game in this chapter focuses on imaginaries of ontological (in)security in this fabulation. This is fitting, as even one of the main conceits of the game can be viewed in terms of insecurity: the protagonist has reached a state of total ontological insecurity, as he has lost his memory and sense of who he and the world are. Concomitantly, he is ontologically insecure and existentially uncertain in a multitude of ways. The player too experiences a sense of insecurity as the game subverts a number of game genre expectations. While the game is a murder mystery, it is also an investigation into the past and character of the protagonist. The player can try to reestablish the previous character model that the game's narrative and situations provide hints at, but they can also guide the protagonist into new directions. Irrespective of the content of this (re)construction of the character and their relationship with other non-player characters (NPCs) and the game world, it is a process of establishing ontological security. This happens through seeking reaffirmation of a self-identity by drawing closer to various collectivities that the game offers as sources of recognition to reduce the sense of insecurity, unease and anxiety—phrased in terms of a "lack" in the game. This can

play out in a variety of options in regard to ideological positions. The purpose of this chapter is to examine these imaginaries in terms of (in)security relations.

I begin the chapter with an introduction to the notions of ontological (in)security and political imaginaries. I then discuss the notion of recognition and its lack in terms of ontological security and insecurity. These sections are followed by an analysis of the particular security imaginaries that the game offers. I conclude the chapter with some reflections on ontological security and the study of political imaginaries within the investigation of popular culture and world politics.

## 9.1 Ontological (in)security

The notions of ontological security and insecurity originate from the work of Ronald D. Laing (2010 [1969]), particularly his book *The Divided Self*. While Laing was a practitioner of psychoanalysis who treated conditions such as schizophrenia, his approach was also explicitly political in that he viewed mental disorders as the result of both biological and social factors (Rossdale 2015, 370). Ontologically insecure individuals have lost a temporally consistent sense of themselves and their identity and feel that the content of their character cannot be guaranteed to be genuine, good and valuable. For such individuals, even everyday life can appear as existentially threatening (Laing 2010 [1969], 49), like for the protagonist who can die from switching on the light in their hotel room or by sitting on an uncomfortable chair. This makes it difficult to realize which difficulties and dangers are worth confronting, and which are not (Mitzen 2006, 345). Ontological security though is not about physical survival but about the security of the self—of the subjective sense of who one is.

The multiple aspects of how a sense of self and identity are constructed are present in DE through the various psychological and bodily elements of the player character that give ostensible descriptions and interpretations of the world and its situations for the player. These aspects of personality also bring in an element of emotion and affect, as they describe how certain situations or sensations feel for the character. Emphasizing one of these traits over the others makes its observations and interpretations more dominant, which, as the game also points out, can lead to distortions in the observations and interpretations they make. Ideological imaginaries can produce similar filters through which to observe the world, and their emotional appeal can be one reason for why they are able to grip and take hold of particular subjects (Kinnvall 2018). They can allow new eyes to see with but may also produce a blinding effect when relied on too much. Indeed, DE places the player in a situation where some identity traits are established and enforced within the makeup of the character, which impacts how the character is juxtaposed to the world and the NPCs in it. The player has some power to make the world accept their view of the character, but the world also provides resistance to at least some of them, even though it does embrace the absurd too.

While the origins of ontological (in)security as an approach to research are within psychology, Anthony Giddens is credited with bringing the idea within the realm of

sociology. For Giddens (1991, 38–39), ontological security is about a "person's fundamental sense of safety in the world and includes a basic trust of other people." It is about the "security of being," about "confidence and trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be," including a sense of self and social identity (Giddens 1984, 375). Losing this sense of trust in one's self and the world is a source of "existential anxiety" (Giddens 1991). As such, ontological security implies confidence in the world to be what it appears to be, in the story told of the "self" as being good, and that these identity avowals are also recognized by other individuals and communities of worth (Honneth 2005). DE places the player character in near absolute jeopardy in regard to these elements, as due to his amnesia, he has lost a sense of "a consistent feeling of biographical continuity" (Kinnvall 2004, 746), and thereby his ability to sustain even the simplest forms of doing and being in complex human social realities like the comprehension and use of money. Indeed, progress in the game is a process of becoming, both in the sense of constructing the character and personality traits for the protagonist and in reconstructing social reality akin to a "philosopher" who does not take anything for granted. The sense of everything appearing strange and unfamiliar is explicitly present in the game in the form of the "thought" of "jamais vu (derealization)," the opposite of déjà vu.

Security studies have subsequently picked up the notion of ontological (in)security, and used it to study political dynamics of populism, conflict and post-colonialism to name just a few examples (Mitzen 2006; Kinnvall 2004, 2018; Steele 2008a). A key concern has been the idea that "agency requires a stable cognitive environment" (Mitzen 2006, 342) and that a sense of constant anxiety can be replaced with the securitization of the ontological subject (Kinnvall 2004). Here, trauma too can be a source of ontological insecurity, whether the trauma is personal or a collectively "chosen" historical "wrong"; at the same time, "glories" of the past can be a source for ontological security even when the current circumstances suggest otherwise (Kinnvall 2004, 755). This is part of the appeal of nativist populist discourses (Kinnvall 2018). "Normative threats" have also been presented as jeopardizing established moral self-affirmations of communities and thereby undermining societal trust and upsetting the sense of agency in the world (Mälksoo 2019, 366).

Such elements are poignantly present in DE as well, where a trauma in the protagonist's family life is set up as the main source of his descent into substance abuse and hopelessness, or the other way around. There are also a number of NPCs that linger on or draw from constructions of collective past glories or conversely refuse to let go of past failures. There are examples of both fascist and communist revolutions where both failed. One way to deal with ontological anxieties is to emphasize and draw on routines (Mitzen 2006, 348; Steele and Homolar 2019). This coping mechanism is poignantly present in the protagonist, who has maintained the same facial expression for decades and is unable to alter it without major difficulties, essentially collapsing his sense of self into a routinized account of his social identity. Some of the early challenges of the protagonist also include

collecting his clothing, badge and gun. As these become more complete, the protagonist's professional social identity is concomitantly reconstructed.

While some of the earlier literature on ontological security within security studies has been criticized for relying too much on Giddens and the idea of the necessity for having a constant and stable identity (i.e., conflating the subjective sense of self and social identities), ontological security can also be viewed more reflexively as a permanent process of becoming in an intersubjective social environment (e.g., Rossdale 2015; Browning and Joenniemi 2017). Indeed, the process of becoming that the character development of the protagonist makes can be viewed in line with Laing's (2010, 25) approach to reconstructing a psychiatric "patient's way of being himself in the world." In a way, the player chooses the answers for the protagonist to questions like whom do I want to be, how can I make my life meaningful and what is a virtuous life. Through this process, the protagonist establishes a sense of ontological security in place of the absolute insecurity where he began the game; yet there is also the possibility that what is chosen is not necessarily what is right; the protagonist can also make bad decisions, like ending the game by becoming a disgraced cop who sleeps in a trash container or even committing suicide. Still, the game can provide the protagonist's character with a reclaimed sense of purpose by gaining recognition, becoming a part of communities of value and even becoming a recovering substance abuser. Before going into the specific elements of (in)security within the communities of value that the game offers for players to establish their character, I will offer a brief introduction into the study of political imaginaries.

## 9.2 The study of political imaginaries

The study of political imaginaries is one of the main avenues for studying PCWP overall (e.g., Caso and Hamilton 2015; Vuori 2015, 2017, 2020, 2022a, 2022b). Social imaginaries concern ways in which people "imagine" social existence, how they fit together with others, and what normal societal expectations and their underlying normative notions are; they are about the "repertory of collective actions" at people's disposal (Taylor 2004, 23–25). Social imaginaries are about how "ordinary people" imagine their social surroundings, which are "carried in images, stories, and legends," as they are "shared by large groups of people" (Taylor 2004, 23). DE too contains such imaginaries, allowing for the exploration of visions of in(security) that are contained in it. Indeed, there is a set of side-quests called political vision quests that become available as options for the player when they have taken enough political positions in the dialogue options presented to them that conform to the ideological line of each vision.

For Jutta Weldes (1999, 10), political imaginaries are about the cultural raw materials of which representations are constructed. In more general terms, for Charles Taylor (2004, 2), social imaginaries enable the practices of society through sense-making. Imaginaries are about how contemporaries imagine societies to be: the imaginary of the society "is the creation of each historical period, its singular

manner of living, of seeing and of conducting its own existence," it is "the basis for articulating what does matter and what does not" (Castoriadis 1975, 92). Ideologies can be distinguished in terms of such elements.

At issue are the ways in which people "imagine" social existence, how they fit together with others, what normal expectations and their underlying normative notions are, such as the ability to identify a "foul" (Taylor 2004, 23–24). Indeed, such imaginaries tell us something about how life in society should be conducted. One aspect here is "internal honor," which curbs inappropriate behavior through internal sanctions (Steele 2008b, 245). Here too, both factual knowledge and works of fiction are operative. For some, "we live in an age where we substitute movies and storytelling for memory" (Rejali 2007, 25). Accordingly, imaginaries refer to understandings of a whole situation where features of the world show up as they do (Kangas 2007, 53). Stories in their various forms can work to make the memories of others our own and thereby shape "public memory" (Lipkin 2011, 1). This is also present in the game through a number of examples of how cultural products, mementos and memorials are used to shape interpretations of the past in crude and subtle ways. Security and the way it is produced are part and parcel of such collective actions as well as public memories of threats and vulnerabilities. At the same time, the sense of self is not only subjective but a sense of worth depends on recognition from communities of value (Honneth 2005). I will discuss these aspects in more detail next.

## 9.3 Recognition and ontological (in)security

Axel Honneth (2005, 170) has examined the possibilities for and requirements of undistorted forms of recognition as emancipation. An undistorted relation to oneself depends on three forms of recognition: love, rights and esteem (Honneth 2005, 1). These forms of recognition produce intersubjective protection against coercion and thereby are the base conditions for external and internal freedom (Honneth 2005, 174). Concomitantly, the task for critical theory is to rid societies of social structures that inhibit identity formation through a lack of recognition. Such structures and their negative consequences for the achievement of desired ways of life can also become the focal point of social struggles for recognition. The degree to which an individual or a group is recognized can also bear on their sense of both individual and social ontological (in)security.

The philosophical debate on the struggle for recognition has focused on the individual's relation with other individuals, social groups and the state (Honneth 2005; Taylor 1992; Fraser and Honneth 2003). For Charles Taylor (1992), recognition is a necessity for contemporary politics, and it is a major feature of both the politics of nationalism and multiculturalism. Here, recognition is tightly connected with identities, which are affected by the recognition received from others, or misrecognition by them. For Taylor, recognition operates on two levels: the intimate and public spheres. Similarly, Honneth (2005, 132) examines not only recognition but also disrespect and how the affective life can provide motivation for social

resistance and conflict, for struggles for recognition. Such elements are prominent in DE too, where the protagonist and many NPCs are engaged in seeking both individual and societal recognition, as well as in denying it from others through displays of disrespect.

Identity imputations and avowals, self-descriptions, are a vital aspect of social mobilization and ontological security. In DE, the player can choose among a number of such imputations, including absurd ones, and the NPCs provide recognition or refuse it for them. The player's consistency here affects the ideological thoughts the protagonist develops in its "thought cabinet" as well as the political side-quests that become available. This accords with the notion that meaning implies not only what is at issue but also what is to be done about the issue in question (Schön and Rein 1994, 29). Identity narratives are not private constructions but social and relational (Williams 2007, 69–70). Narrative resources available to an actor are historically and socially constructed and contained and depend on recognition and acquiescence by others. Mere identity imputations or avowals are insufficient as they must also be acknowledged by others as legitimate. Such frames produce accounts of who we are as well as how we would like others to view us. Yet, for these to be felicitous, others must recognize us for who we frame ourselves to be; identities are social facts, which come about through social interaction (Ringmar 2012, 5). Recognition legitimates the narratives and frames that we produce of ourselves. In order to gain "self-confidence" (Honneth 2005), legitimating recognition needs to come from someone or something, which is in turn recognized. This kind of reciprocal recognition produces imagined communities. Of import here is that the value of recognition derives from the reciprocal partner. That which or who grants recognition has to be viewed as deserving recognition itself. The exclusionary nature of the ideological side-quests in DE underlines this feature.

If we take the individual as the referent of security, we quickly realize that their well-being does not only require means for sustenance of their physical well-being, but also various mental and social features are necessary to maintain a proper human existence (Maslow 1943). DE points to such necessities poignantly through its setting and characters in it. Recognition in its various forms is vital here. This becomes strikingly apparent when individuals and groups of people are denied recognition, which has been the case for a number of subaltern groups that have been marginalized and systematically denied recognition (Hindess 2001). Such forms of repression have included the denial of status as a person, inviolability of physical integrity and worth of forms of life (Anderson 2005, x). DE provides a number of subject-positions in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, mental disorders, as well as alcoholism and drug addiction that can be used to explore their positions of exploitation and subjugation.

Honneth (2005) divides the aspects of a person's identity formation into three parts: those of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. To gain any of these requires intersubjective relations with other individuals and groups of people who grant the individual recognition in each of these aspects. In order to have self-confidence, an individual needs relations of love and friendship; in order for the

individual to have self-respect, there needs to be legally institutionalized respect for the autonomy and dignity of individual persons that is universal in the sense that it is not dependent on status or particular deeds, and finally, in order for an individual to have self-esteem, there need to be communities of shared values that deem the worth of an individual within networks of solidarity. The protagonist has lost all of these aspects at the start of the game but can gain them as the game progresses.

From the viewpoint of social struggle, of interest are the aspects of self-respect (i.e., respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons—rights) and self-esteem (i.e., communities of shared values and networks of solidarity), as these take on sociohistorical forms and relate individuals into groups beyond a person's immediate relationships. To have self-respect one has to view oneself as having the same status and treatment as every other person; individuals or social groups can bear rights only if they are recognized as members of a community (Honneth 2005, 109). Self-esteem, on the other hand, is dependent on characteristics that allow an individual to possess a view of themself as particular, as something valuable. To have self-esteem, there needs to be a sense of a shared value-horizon (Honneth 2005, 121). Crucial here is what is considered to be of value in society or a contribution toward its betterment. The player can direct the protagonist toward value-horizons that represent ideological archetypes or caricatures.

For Honneth, all aspects of an individual's identity formation are dependent on intersubjective relations; in other words, the sense of moral recognition or the lack thereof is at the center of his analysis. Accordingly, the establishment of reciprocal recognition is a precondition for self-realization (Anderson 2005, x). Such a stance brings the emotive into the forefront of social mobilization; protest and resistance need not be about interests but may also be about a sense of injustice (Honneth 2005, 161). For Honneth, the grammar of protest can be "moral"; feelings of indignation and outrage can stem from the denial or rejection of recognition, which in turn denies the normative legitimacy of certain beliefs, behaviors, habits or social conventions. The motivational impetus for resistance may then stem from moral feelings of indignation rather than from some pure forms of "interest." The history of DE exhibits multiple instances when resistance took violent forms. They have all failed though, which maintains a sense of melancholy and impotence in the NPCs that hold on to their old beliefs nevertheless.

Many dialogue options in DE justify their ideological positions through sociopolitical or economic struggles or injustices. The critical impulse of Honneth's (2012, 76) approach too is to draw attention to social phenomena where insufficient or completely lacking recognition is a prime issue. Various practices of humiliation or degradation can deprive individuals of social recognition and concomitantly of social autonomy. In this way, the question of recognition is at the same time one of domination and subjugation through its denial. Accordingly, a lack of recognition can lead to a sense of ontological insecurity.

Indeed, on the other side of the coin, the denial of recognition can be viewed as a form of violence in structural, cultural or symbolic terms (Galtung 1990; Bourdieu

1977). Johan Galtung (1990) divides forms of violence into three strata: those of cultural, structural and direct violence. In terms of basic needs, violence is their denial or negation; for survival needs, their negation is death and mortality; for well-being needs, their denial is misery and morbidity; for identity and meaning needs, their negation is alienation; and for freedom needs, their denial is repression. Such elements are present in DE in the form of its game mechanic where the character can lose health or morale points, even with fatal results, when they are disrespected. For Bourdieu (1977), symbolic forms of violence are, at their core, impositions of thought and perception in categories that favor the dominant, as the dominated take these impositions to be just. Symbolic violence in this sense is close to cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1971); hegemony is social and political power derived from a populace's "spontaneous consent." Rather than operating through brute force, hegemony works through intellectual and moral authority to form a sense of the self-evident, which is poignantly present in DE through the Moralintern Coalition that is in a hegemonic position, as well as the inescapability of capitalism in the game world. Both hegemony and symbolic violence incorporate unconscious structures that tend to perpetuate the structurally favorable positions of the dominant. Symbolic violence or cultural hegemony can be more powerful than physical violence in that they are embedded into both modes of action and structures of cognition. These elements are replete in DE, where Martinaise and its inhabitants are in ruins and exploited by both capitalism and corrupt workers' organizations.

In both symbolic and structural terms, the denial of recognition is a form of violence. For Taylor (1992, 25–26), both nonrecognition and misrecognition can cause harm and be a form of repression. Mis- or nonrecognition that is systematic in the public sphere can produce a false, distorted and simplified sense of identity. For Honneth (2005), the denial of recognition is a form of disrespect, which is taken to be an important source of social struggle. Such disrespect can, for example, entail the denial of opportunity to earn esteem from solidarity networks by taking away opportunities to work for the common good. Each of the three forms of recognition (love, rights, esteem) corresponds to experiences of disrespect and thereby becomes motives for social conflict (Honneth 2005, 2). Disrespect does not necessarily have to mean a confrontation over self-preservation but can include ethical dimensions in light of an experience of receiving insufficient recognition (Honneth 2005, 17). This can become apparent in the willingness to die for certain principles or identities, which shows how they can be more valued than continued physical existence (Honneth 2005, 23). Accordingly, both the protagonist and NPCs put their body and life on the line in DE for either material, ideological or personal reasons.

In regard to self-esteem, there are also forms of disrespect that harm a person's dignity and social value, and also target individual or collective ways of life (Honneth 2005). A society's cultural horizon may elevate the esteem of individuals when their activities accord with values of worth within this network of solidarity. However, such horizons may also relegate the esteem of individuals and groups if their activities or views are taken to go against appropriate values, or are found to

be inferior to them. If such relegation takes place, individuals can no longer attribute social worth to their actions that may have previously endowed them with a sense of worth. Social devaluation means that the previous form of life no longer has a positive significance within the larger community, whereby the self-esteem of disrespected individuals may become undermined. Such disrespect can even take the form of structural violence toward an individual's identity-needs, as certain identities are categorized as ineligible, and the process of producing and reproducing identities becomes undermined (Galtung 1990). This is the dynamic that can direct people to seek recognition from subcultures. Criminal gangs, cults and terrorist organizations can exploit this by providing recognition for individuals that seek it. The ideological communities of the political vision quests are one way for the protagonist to seek remediation for his experience of a lack of recognition.

For Honneth (2005, 162–63), when we examine moral indignation and the moral grammar of social struggle, it becomes apparent that disrespect in regard to love or self-confidence is not sufficient to be a basis for collective social struggle. Indeed, what is needed for social mobilization in protest is a sense of a shared grievance (Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994). In terms of moral indignation, such a shared sense of injustice can be produced by the denial of recognition in regard to rights and self-respect as well as solidarity and self-esteem. If it becomes apparent that the disrespect, exclusion, insult and degradation are not just the experience of an individual but a shared form of grievance, this can become the vocal point of resistance and social mobilization. The two latter forms of disrespect can become the foci of social struggle as they rely on socially generated criteria and are subjected to sociohistorical change. In such cases, individual experiences of disrespect can be experienced as applicable to entire groups and thereby motivate collective demands. When the protagonist has encountered enough of such personal experiences in DE, they can be turned into "thoughts" that contain elements of collective identities and disrespect to them. A sense of a shared grievance in terms of denial of recognition can be elemental in the establishment of the cultural conditions for protest (Anderson 2005, xix). In other words, an insult of one is an insult of all with the same rights or sense of value-community of solidarity. This dynamic is also evident in how the political vision quests represent the draw of some of the ideological positions. Indeed, disrespect is accompanied by affective sensations that may bring home the realization that individuals are deprived of certain forms of recognition. A sense of shame may then become the motivational impetus for a struggle for recognition (Honneth 2005, 138), which brings the emotive side of resistance and protest into light. I will now move on to examine the imaginaries involved in constructing a more secure sense of the self and its relations to others within DE where the emotive aspect is placed in an essential position.

## 9.4 Imaginaries of (in)security in *Disco Elysium*

The game world of DE and its narratives approach insecurities from a variety of angles. These provide an opportunity for the player to reflect on the different views

and dynamics of individuals' and groups' senses of (in)security through their structural positions within societal discourses. The security discourses of the various societal positions and discourses present in the game show how each presents its own approach as legitimate and marginalizes others (Dijk 1997). As such, the game provides a number of examples for how such discursive communities construct their takes on who "we" are, what that "we" believes in and "who" is to blame for the state of the world, which is mired by anxiety and insecurity (cf., Kinnvall 2018, 525). Such communities in the game use or have left behind various artefacts that contain symbols, collective memories and both forms of heritage and myth that channel emotional needs for recognition, and thereby work to remedy perceived insults in the form of disrespect or mis-recognition (Honneth 2005). While societies and individuals generally have multiple cultural repertoires to draw on for recognition, when ontological security is at stake, there can be a tendency to focus on one particular source in this (cf., Cash 2020, 311). Accordingly, the choices presented to the player take the character to the extreme in such positions, even by becoming a "radical centrist" and a "boring cop."

Many of the real-world sources of societal ontological insecurity are traced to processes of globalization in its many forms, which have created political uncertainties and undermined the predominant position of the state in many regards. These have engendered forms of political and social change including dislocations, hybridizations and impermanence for many forms of life (Cash and Kinnvall 2017, 267). This has undermined the imaginary of solid state borders that have developed in tandem with the notion of the nation-state and the development of governance technologies since the 1700s in Europe (Holsti 2004). Attempts at regaining this sense of control in a world where regional and global dynamics have put the fantasy of the nation under pressure have provided for renewed resonance for populist and nationalist discourses (Kinnvall 2018).

In DE too, the global and the insecurities it produces are present. The backdrop of the game is a part of a city where the dock, which represents global flows of commodities, is a major feature. There is a past of warfare and failed revolutions that haunts the present through the remains of combat in both the cityscape and the mentalities as well as actions of NPCs. Capitalist development and the inequalities within production under conditions of neoliberalism are one of the key elements of even DE's main storyline where the backdrop of the murder investigation happens during a dockworkers' strike that ostensibly has gone violent, and where the owners of the dock have sent in paramilitary forces to break up the strike by any means necessary. Issues of immigration are also heavily present through a number of racist characters and the option to become one yourself.

Transformative forces such as these can produce a sense of rootlessness, which is countered by characters in the game by, for example, drawing on a nationalist past for Revachol.[1] This attitude represents de-modernization and the return to an imagined past with truer meaning as an answer to the ontological insecurity the state of the world produces for set identities and senses of the self. Drawing on symbols and discourses of past greatness is a way to rekindle a lost sense of security

(Kinnvall 2004, 743). The game also features aspects of a post-colonial past in both the form of military history and the misappropriation of relief aid by a shady thrift salesman. The Moralintern Coalition can also be interpreted as colonizing Revachol financially, even though they present themselves in a progressive humanist light. This is even explicitly noted by the ultraliberal NPC Joyce, who is a representative of the Wild Pines company in the game.

As such, the game world provides a plethora of political ideas and imaginations that are in conflict within it. The past of the world saw attempts at forcing a hegemonic position for such ideas in the form of royalist authoritarianism and a communist revolution, both of which failed. The current hegemony is the moralist alliance that imposes itself through military supremacy yet does not provide a fair social or economic order in Revachol. The Pale that is encroaching on the world and negating it provides an existential threat for the world, which will endure further destabilization until a new world emerges where people can move forward, and be ontologically secure. Each political vision quest suggests a path for moving beyond the post-revolutionary emergent order.

### *Ideological communities of ontological security*

The game offers the player a choice of political vision quests that are divided into the four main ideological archetypes present in it: a fascist, a communist, a moralist and an ultraliberal. This choice is framed in terms of the protagonist filling the void of love that is lacking since his personal relationship ended. Going along one of the archetypes offers a community of value that provides for self-worth for the protagonist and concomitantly a source for (re)constituting ontological security.

Choosing enough dialogue options or doing some other specific tasks in the game offers up "thoughts" that abide by the four ideological caricatures in the game world. These can be developed into elements in the "thought cabinet" and provide either "buffs" or "nerfs" to the character in the game. In addition to such political thoughts, there are the political vision quests that the player can choose to go through. These are framed as the protagonist's futile attempt at trying to "win her back," as him being a real "political animal," and as his inability to realize that it is the world that is changing him rather than the other way around.

Several NPCs in DE are racist, traditionalist or outright fascist. As the deserted revolutionary communist veteran notes in the endgame, racism is a favored pastime in Martinaise, yet he too calls the traditionalist veteran René a race traitor. The traditionalists long for the pre-revolutionary era of royalty, even though they see that the last king was corrupt and incompetent. Racist characters in the fascist spectrum include those who have had the hegemonic position in this social hierarchy in the past but feel that they have lost their position of dominance that was their birthright, that provided them with love and respect just from being in their racial category. There are also previously oppressed characters that espouse their superiority based on their genetic purity and obtuse racial theorization that can also be developed into a thought. This point is underlined by the physical prowess and sexual interest from multiple women that the NPC Measurehead has.

The racist NPCs cannot avoid showing their disrespect to both the protagonist and his partner Kim Kitsuragi. The player too has the option to be full-on racist, even toward Kim. The fascist thought makes itself known by asking the protagonist whether the source of Revachol's problems is foreigners, leftist academics, liberals or financiers. Irrespective of the choice, the real source is named as "women" who are insane and should "know their place" in the kitchen. This feeling can be developed into the thought of "Revacholian nationhood," where a strong state is presented as the remedy to the ruin that foreigners, socialists and liberals have wrecked on Revachol.

The fascist political vision quest begins as nationalism for Revachol. It soon becomes apparent though that attempts at relabeling fascism as, for example, traditionalism fail to cover up the racist and misogynist essence of the ideology. Fascism is represented among the protagonist's inner voices by his lower intestine. The intestine feels that the "women" have taken charge and that the protagonist should turn back the wheels of time to the era of the suzerain, to when love was still possible. The race-supremacist NPC Measurehead drives this point further by noting that despite their rhetoric of aims like honor, redemption and revenge, men desire the past because of love. There is however only love in the present. It is the lack of love and intimacy with women due to the individual's perceived descent in the hierarchy of recognition that is the source of the bitterness that drives the hatred of women and minorities. According to Measurehead, this is made manifest as reduced success in the genetic competition for mating, as fewer victories in the biological competition. Those who are able to pass on their genes the most win the future, yet passing on the blueprint of one's spirit is worth even more. For the protagonist though, going back in time would allow him to revive disco, protect the suzerain, clean up and save Revachol, and "get her back," to become "the man." Completing the fascist path either makes the protagonist feel like a failure whose *wömen* only have sex with foreign men or bears the face of a noble sufferer that keeps pushing on through the wrongs of the world like an ice-breaker. This source of recognition and ontological security bears a heavy price though, as this face is a horror even to the protagonist himself.

The communards/communists staged a violent revolution in Revachol, which was ended by a more violent invasion by the international coalition that keeps Martinaise as its zone of control when the game takes place. While the dockworker's union is in a power position, and its militant wing operates as the *de facto* police in Martinaise, they are social democrats. The communists have been either eradicated or driven underground. Choosing leftist dialogue options allows the player to develop the thought of "Mazovian Socio-Economics," which makes everything appear as reactionism, and results in melancholic impotence in regard to altering the world for the better. The protagonist can also develop the thought that he is Kras Mazov, the father of scientific communism, and that his suicide did not actually take place.

The communist vision quest is framed as a mission that aims at bringing communism for all, and that this time it will not fail. It is too great a task though, so

the protagonist has to "get organized." The protagonist needs to find his revolutionary brothers and sisters who are just waiting for the protagonist to join them in order to achieve the world republic and communism for all. Their persecution by Coalition authorities has forced them underground, but their smell of failure allows the protagonist to sense them. A key part of being a communist is complaining about other communists, which presents an even more marginal source for a sense of worth for producing ontological security. The way into the underground two-person reading group is to become versed in the critical thinking within Mazovian theory, particularly infra-materialism. The true essence of communism though is faith in the future of humanity, that the future can be better than the past. The history in the game world suggests that any attempts at a communist future will be resisted and will eventually fail after a moment, like the physically instable tower of dialectical history. The player can choose to aid the community to grow though, thus increasing its recognition and potential for providing ontological security.

The Coalition and the Moralist International suppressed the communist revolution and have been in a hegemonic position ever since. They represent centrism ideologically that is framed in the game as the maintenance of the status quo that is essentially financial colonialism guised in a democratic veneer. If the player chooses enough "reasonable" and "temperate" political dialogue choices, "empathy" will suggest that the protagonist is a "radical centrist." This can be developed into the thought of the "kingdom of conscience," which is a rare moment in time that requires specific circumstances to come about incrementally, without rapid transformations toward a good society. The kingdom will be post-capitalist, post-industrial, post-ideological, and even post-sexual. Internalizing the thought though brings about the realization that the kingdom to come, sometime in the distant future will be exactly as things are now despite the apparent incremental democratization that is taking place toward the eventual "real democracy." Centrism is not about change, but control, that is guaranteed by the military might that hangs in the sky above Revachol.

The moralist political vision quest is framed as the protagonist making measured steady progress toward the greater good, toward the big questions like the transition to real democracy and the maintenance of the price of goods. This pushes the protagonist on a quest to find who bears "*la responsabilité*" that is distributed among many organizations, agencies and portfolios. Indeed, there already is a committee for assigning responsibility in Revachol. The way to contact the committee is to communicate via the Coalition Warship Archer that is the center for the Coalition's surveillance and communications infrastructure in Revachol where it abides by international conventions. Establishing the contact lets the protagonist know that the coming real democracy depends on contingencies that need to be planned ahead for millennia, and that Revachol is only in the first stage of democratization out of five phases. During the transitory time, the Moralintern preserves humanity together with its greatest achievements that include the welfare state and "balance of terror theory" from the threats of ideological

revolutions and global problems like atomic war, environmental degradation and viral pandemics. The protagonist can take on responsibility for all of Revachol by telling the Coalition that Revachol is about to erupt in violent civil conflict, and that he has discovered an "entroponetic phenomenon" in Martinaise, which require the Coalition's immediate intervention. This will allow the protagonist to go onto the warship, which will end the game. The protagonist can receive recognition from the "legitimate authority" of Revachol, but this means that his organic community will lose him. The protagonist's identity as a police officer though abides by the Moralintern even if he decides to remain on the case.

The ultraliberalists are portrayed by the NPC Joyce Messier as those who survived the revolution and who gathered the wealth not appropriated by the international Coalition by betraying both the king and the revolution, effectively surrendering the nation to financial colonization. This is why people do not explicitly identify as an ultraliberalist in the game's world. If the player chooses enough dialogue options that abide by the archetype of ultraliberal like grinding and hustling, the protagonist can develop a thought that presents the reason for the poverty he experiences as the result of taxation. If this thought is developed, this personal experience of a slight is expanded into a shared grievance that requires a shared fight against "indirect modes of taxation."

The beginning of the ultraliberal political vision quest is framed with becoming "a man of plenty" beyond an ordinary rich person offering a way to "win her back," of money filling the lack left by the loss of love. Gaining a significant "net worth" during the quest makes the protagonist feel more akin to "a high net worth individual" that is so wealthy that the protagonist perceives him as bending the light around him. Furthermore, the effect being ultrarich has on poorer merchants makes the protagonist feel like a "hot-shot." Using the wealth to acquire material things makes the protagonist feel that "she" will love them. Similarly, to truly gain the respect of the people of Martinaise, the protagonist's net worth needs to be converted into something tangible. Kim Kitsuragi sums the vision quest up as a "pursuit of wealth," as a "pursuit of recognition." The dialogue options available to the player allow for different frames for the core of the task that include aiming to "win her back," and being a philanthropist in service of the local community. While "making mad paper" does not win "her" back, it does provide a new community for the protagonist among the moderately high net-worth individuals, and thereby new wells for recognition and ontological security.

### *Organic communities of ontological security*

One form of transcending alienation and producing recognition is the formation of organic communities. The protagonist has multiple options for gaining the recognition of his peers and new communities of worth. The style of music has moved on from the disco era of the protagonist's youth, yet by interacting and aiding a group of youngsters (involved in the drug trade), the protagonist can organize a rave in an old church and turn it into a dance club. This community is about "hard core," which can also be developed into a thought. For the youngsters,

love is hard core, and hard core is unity. Indeed, electronic dance music allows for a communal experience that can entail spiritual entrancement even when the individuals remain alienated and isolated. In other words, the community is anonymous yet brought together by the shared rhythm. Establishing the rave in a former church highlights the role of autonomous community and the disparity between self-organization and institutions. Indeed, an alternative plotline includes a process of corrupted gentrification by the leader of the dock workers' union.

Another organic community for the protagonist is his peers. As the "*esprit de corps*" voice suggests, "you are part of a large family, you are never alone." The protagonist's new partner Kim Kitsuragi is skeptical of the odd methods the protagonist deploys in his detective work, but the player has the option to recruit Kim into his precinct and gain the recognition of both his new and previously estranged partner. Another option is to recruit an initially hostile street urchin as a "partner" in the latter half of the game if Kim ends up incapacitated and to even convince him to join the precinct. Some endings of the game allow for such arcs of recovery and redemption for the protagonist that reestablish his source of ontological security as a police officer.

## 9.5 Conclusion

The protagonist begins DE in a state of total ontological insecurity, yet completing the game offers a number of choices for finding political communities from which to source recognition and ontological security. Some of these are more suitable for moral health, whereas others are portrayed as leading to further isolation and the perpetuation of disrespect in order to maintain the ontological security of the self. Accordingly, as the earlier discussion has shown, political imaginaries can be a source of recognition and thereby of ontological security. Poignantly, the totality of the game itself can be taken as an apt metaphor for ontological insecurity and ways for overcoming it. By making choices within the narrative of the game, the protagonist's ontological security can be (re)constituted, or the player can fail to achieve it. Overall, stories, myths and pieces of culture and art are used to maintain collective ontological security. DE shows how video games too are an art-form that can participate in and critically examine in this construction. This shows how RPGs are a worthwhile object for the study of popular culture and world politics.

## Note

1. The name Revachol is a reference to the French anarchist Ravachol who operated in the late 1800s. The city of Koenigstein in DE is also a reference to Ravachol's actual name. ⏎

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## Section four

# Oppression and liberation in *Disco Elysium*

# 10 "I don't want to be this kind of animal anymore!"

## Unthinking policing in *Disco Elysium*

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### Introduction

Trying to figure out who killed the mercenary currently hanging from a tree behind the Whirling-Inn-Rags hostel is a difficult task and not one to be completed in a hurry. As such, *Disco Elysium* encourages the player to take breaks, wander around the district of Martinaise and chat to residents. One of the early locations the player is likely to visit is the bookshop, owned by the anxious Pleasance and her daughter Annette, who guide you through the different genres on offer:

*Harry/You*: "What is this crime business?"
*Annette*: "Crime fiction is about murders or burglaries or things like that. And the work of a policeman or a private detective who's trying to solve a crime and catch the criminals."
...
*Harry/You*: "Okay, I get it. Crime-murder gets the people going."
*Annette*: "Mhm-mhm," she replies. "And it's kinda like a puzzle, too. You can guess who the criminal is or how the good guys are going to catch him."

At a brief glance, *Disco Elysium* itself seems like a routine (if wacky) crime-murder story. Players new to the game might reasonably expect to follow a dysfunctional but brilliant cop as he unravels a mystery and restores order. Those who pay careful attention might even hope to stay one step ahead of the narrative. But it quickly becomes clear that this is not a conventional work of crime fiction.

The genre of detective/crime fiction plays an important role in stabilizing ideas about the police, law, crime and justice. By tracing the journey of a detective figure who accumulates enough knowledge to bring clarity and thus order, it reproduces the idea that justice is both objective and apolitical, and situates policing as a

project of masterful administration. Crucially, by giving the reader (or player) enough information to solve the mystery for themselves, detective fiction invites both participation and indulgence in this process. Missing from the genre is a recognition of policing as a primary form of modern violence; of the police as the upholders of political systems rooted in domination, exploitation and ecocide; and of law and justice as always politically situated.

Beyond detective fiction, there has been widespread and growing recognition of the harms of policing. Abolitionist thinkers have demonstrated how the global system of racial capitalism is reliant on policing organizations to enforce political order and suppress threats to that order (Duff 2021; Gilmore 2022; Williams 2015). Substantial ideological work goes in to normalizing the idea that the police exist as a neutral force to ensure public safety; "[a]s activists continually point out, policing and its best qualities exist primarily in our minds." One of the crucial tasks for abolitionist politics is therefore to challenge the "claim that policing made us safe or safer," to cultivate the understanding "that police are in fact a fundamental contributor to the violence in our society" (Walcott 2021, 71; see also Wang 2018, 296–322). Various writers have identified speculative fiction as a genre with the capacity to "expose the naturalised ideology" of carceral systems (Crockett Thomas 2022, 10; see also Brown and Imarisha 2015). In this chapter I explore how, as a subversion of the detective fiction genre, the speculative fiction of *Disco Elysium* invites players to adopt a critical perspective on police and policing.

*Disco Elysium* places the player in the soiled shoes of washed-up detective Harrier "Harry" Du Bois. Following a particularly intense bingeing session, Harry is suffering from amnesia; he has no idea who, what or where he is, nor how he found himself in this situation. We quickly learn that he is a police officer with the Revachol Citizens Militia (RCM), that he is in the impoverished district of Martinaise, and that he has been sent here to solve a murder. And then, much more slowly and in collaboration with Harry's dependable partner Kim Kitsuragi, we solve a series of mysteries: Who *are* you? What happened to your badge and gun? Why is Martinaise falling apart? And who did kill that man? The role-playing element of the game means that the quest to discover who Harry *is* will simultaneously be a journey to decide who he will become—what kind of cop and what kind of man.

The game's primary form of interaction is through conversations, and a significant proportion of these take place not with other people inhabiting Martinaise but with Harry's internal systems. These sixteen voices, which include Harry's sense of authority, composure, visual calculus, as well as more obscure ones including "shivers" (his instinctive connection to the city) and "esprit de corps" (his instinctive connection to the police), are constant companions. They offer information and useful but often contradictory advice and sometimes guide Harry to intervene in and shape situations. Throughout the game the player can level up these voices, amplifying their role in Harry's psyche. (Re)building Harry's mind is an integral part of working through the mystery.

It is not immediately clear that the game will take an oppositional line on the police. The game's marketing tagline asked, "What Kind of Cop Are You?," signaling

a familiar spectrum from the corrupt to the virtuous. It is in fact possible to play the game as a more or less sensible cop. Nevertheless, through the game's political stories and world-building, interactive explorations of mastery and failure, and fantastical subversion of the detective fiction genre, it engages in a deep critique of policing. My argument here turns on two central claims. First, that abolitionist critiques of policing and carceral systems should attend to (and seek to unthink) the politics of mastery. Second, that—at its best—*Disco Elysium*'s critiques of policing interweave with its narrative and ludic subversions of mastery.

Julietta Singh identifies mastery as being "intimately ingrained ... in the fabric of modern thought, subjectivity, and politics" (2018, 2). Whether understood as the sovereign overcoming of an opponent or the "skillful management of the self and its others" that has characterized biopolitical society (11), the cardinal ambition of modern politics has been the achievement of mastery. Singh thus argues that

> drives towards mastery inform and underlie the major crises of our times—acts of intrahuman violence across the globe, the radical disparities in resources and rights between the Global North and Global South, innumerable forms of human and nonhuman extinction, and escalating threats of ecological disaster.
>
> (3)

While the forms of mastery evident in capitalist, colonial and heteropatriarchal projects are widely recognized as violent, Singh's more fundamental argument is that violence inheres in the pursuit of mastery, whatever the object. This is because "there is an intimate link between the mastery enacted through colonization and other forms of mastery that we often believe today to be harmless, worthwhile, even virtuous" (9), and more intrinsically because mastery, insofar as it invariably "reaches towards the indiscriminate control over something—whether human or inhuman, animate or inanimate," and "aims for the full submission of an object—or something *objectified*—whether it be external or internal to oneself," "requires a rupturing of the object being mastered" (10). In short, mastery cultivates a relationship of domination, and so the "partial destruction of the object that the would-be master yearns to govern over completely" (10).

While the forms of mastery manifest in colonial and capitalist domination present urgent threats to human survival, Singh argues both that more liberatory political forces can themselves engage in projects of mastery and that these "masterful gestures" can (re)produce the subordination or exclusion of marginal subjects —"colonized women, indigenous peoples, the 'un-civilized' groups of the emergent nation-state, the animal, the cripple, and nature itself" (31). As such, she cautions against a radical politics that retains the faith in better, more ethical, more revolutionary modes of mastery and which thus "concede to the inescapability of mastery as a way of life" (7). Instead, she pushes us to think about what it would take to undo, unsettle, unthink mastery. To become *unmasterful*. This cannot involve an

easy disavowal—modern subjectivity is too entangled in the desire for mastery for such gestures to be successful. Rather, through a process of considering how, in

> failing to master, in confronting our own desires for mastery where we least expect or recognize these desires, we become vulnerable to other possibilities for living, for being together in common, for *feeling* injustice and refusing it without the need to engage it through forms of conquest.
>
> (21)

Singh thus engages with "revolutionary and literary texts in ways that can reorient our masterful pursuits" (2–3). I want to suggest that *Disco Elysium* is a text that encourages the player to reconsider their masterful orientations.

Policing is integral to modern projects of mastery. If, with Mark Neocleous, we see police power as a range of practices, institutions and technologies that form the social order while pacifying disobedient or troublesome subjects (2014, 10–11), then we can recognize policing as a necessary and productive force in political domination, and as intimately intertwined with the development of a capitalist, colonial, white supremacist global order (Seigel 2018; Walcott 2021; Williams 2015). Policing is most obviously carried out by formal police forces, border agencies and militaries, but no less significantly in schools, mental health and social work organizations, and sometimes trade unions (Rossdale 2021, 35). It involves both the imposition or maintenance of a particular social order, and the circulation of discourses that position that social order as a virtuous space under constant threat from dangerous, unruly, poor and racialized others, in the face of which only the police—the thin blue line—can hold things together (Wall 2019). The structural and discursive role of the police is fundamentally one of mastery.

Policing organizations are also sites where we witness the translation from structural to interpersonal violence. Part of the process of training policing actors to play out their structural role—to identify and manage "problem" populations—involves cultivating libidinal investment in the drive to mastery (Crane-Seeber 2016; Hedges 2002). The objectification process that is intrinsic to mastery is also foundational to policing. In this context, it is hardly surprising that policing actors are so implicated in gendered and racial violence, so quick to use violence, so renowned for corruption. They have been interpellated into a project of domination. Relatedly, those subject to police authority are expected to show some level of deference or compliance; mastery depends on the recognition of the master as master (Singh 2018, 14). Anyone who regularly has interactions with the police can attest that refusing to acknowledge the status of the police as masters is a surefire way to place oneself in danger.

In the first section of the chapter, I set out some of the different policing organizations present in *Disco Elysium*. This includes the RCM but also the Dockworkers' Union and the mercenaries from Krenel. The game situates each of these within the broader context of a colonial/capitalist international system in a way that clearly draws from and elegantly presents critical accounts of the police in

the real world. In the second section I suggest that underpinning the account of these policing forces is the game's broader subversive account of mastery and failure. Through both narrative and gameplay, *Disco Elysium* unsettles the politics of mastery and encourages the inhabitation of unmastery. However, in the final section I outline how the game ultimately leans toward a rehabilitation of both mastery and policing. In line with Singh's approach, I raise this not to undermine what is genuinely radical in the game's approach, but to signal the power of policing and mastery in the cultural imagination.

## 10.1 "I am the law"

*Disco Elysium* privileges the multiple over the singular, its themes emerging through overlapping narratives and contrasting accounts of the same phenomena. Our experience of Harry emerges through the contradictory chorus of his internal narratives; our understanding of Revachol builds through conversations that reveal that no two residents live in precisely the same city. The contradictions that inhere in these competing narratives allow the game to tell powerful stories without foreclosing their meaning. The game uses the same strategy when telling its stories about the police; there is not one but a multiplicity of policing forces within the game, including the RCM, the Union and Krenel. Each plays a particular role in sustaining or reflecting the destitution of Martinaise. Each also expresses a critique of policing that resonates with "real world" contentions.

The organization that is more recognizable as *the* police is the RCM. The RCM consists of uniformed officers and plainclothes detectives who hold some power to investigate crimes, impose fines and carry out arrests. Harry's position within the RCM is an ambivalent one; on the one hand, his self-destructive behavior means he is viewed as a liability by other officers. On the other, as we find out when we eventually find his service record, his success rate in "solving" crimes is impressive.

The relationship between the RCM and the law is uncertain. There are some signs of rigor and care, usually set out by Kim, who tells you about the strict procedures in place governing the use of deadly force and the particular powers of arrest held by officers. It is viewed as a genuine crisis that Harry has lost his badge and his gun; these symbols of his authority clearly matter. However, the RCM also operates with a significant level of discretion both within and beyond the formal law. This is demonstrated in a story from Harry's past, which we learn when eventually locating his service record.

Harry won some admiration for solving "The Unsolvable Case." In this case two people, Leslie and Burke, had been causing problems in a neighborhood; Leslie would take off his pants when drunk, while Burke would trash everything. They could not be dissuaded from these actions—exposure and destruction were their nature—nor could they be stopped through incarceration because public indecency and small-scale property damage are not imprisonable offenses in Martinaise. Where other officers had failed to solve this case, Harry succeeded. We are told that on one occasion Burke picked Harry's ledger as the object of his destruction. In a

drunken rage, Harry beat Burke so severely that Burke was no longer able to walk. Burke was no longer able to engage in destruction, and in turn Leslie's public indecency was restricted as he stayed home to care for Burke. Harry thus "solved" the unsolvable case. His superiors were so grateful that he was even able to avoid a disciplinary hearing for assaulting Burke. The story shifts from whimsical to chilling as we learn more about what Harry's impressive case closure rate involves, and about the role of violence in relation to law and policing in Revachol.

Early in the game, we learn that the source of the RCM's authority lies not with the citizens of Martinaise or Revachol but is instead "leased" by the international Coalition of Nations, which has occupied the city since crushing a major revolution nearly fifty years ago, and who "embolden the RCM with crumbs of the same law they took" (Joyce). That lease of authority is dependent on the RCM's ability to maintain order—"no more no less" (Kim)—with the legal foundation of that order clearly of secondary concern. What laws do exist in Revachol are geared toward protecting the rights of foreign investors rather than attending to the lives and problems of Martinaise residents. The "Emergency, Wayfarer and Ailments Acts," imposed on Revachol after the revolution, keep the city in a "laissez-faire stasis, to the benefit of foreign capital" (Joyce). In that context, the discretion afforded to the RCM by the Coalition is dependent on it maintaining order in this post-revolutionary, colonial context. It is notable that no one seriously disputes this account of the RCM's role, even if some, such as Joyce (the representative of the Wild Pines corporation who own the docks), believe this arrangement to be an acceptable one.

This account of the role of the police, as playing an integral role in reproducing a capitalist and colonial social order that allows for the enrichment of some at the expense of others, is one that fits neatly with contemporary critiques of the police (Duff 2021; Neocleous 2014; Seigel 2018; Walcott 2021; Williams 2015). Police forces invariably claim to be maintaining or restoring order, obscuring the ways in which apparently neutral standards of order are dependent on mass deprivation and exploitation (Rossdale 2021, 35). The residents of Martinaise have an intimate understanding of such critiques, recognizing the police as "vigilantes" (Kim), "a mob, enforcing the unlawful privatization of Revachol" (Elizabeth).

However, and in contrast to this grand structural role, it quickly become apparent that the power of the RCM in Martinaise is actually quite limited. While the Coalition invests them with de jure authority, their capacity to fully exercise that authority in Martinaise is doubtful. By Kim's reckoning, this is a direct consequence of the fact that Martinaise has been abandoned by the rest of Revachol:

*Kim*: "They *really* don't like us here... . It's different inland. In Jamrock and the G.R.I.H." He pulls on the cigarette.
*Harry/You*: "Why *are* they like this?"
*Kim*: "It's our fault for leaving this place to the dogs. To the Union. To the company. Not daring to come here more often. This place has fallen between the cracks. The jurisdictions of our two Precincts."

So limited is the RCM's power in Martinaise that the "Hardie Boys"—a strong-arm squad attached to the Union—feel comfortable (falsely) confessing to murder, knowing that Kim and Harry will not arrest them. At one point Kim cautions Harry that even the death of two RCM officers might not be sufficient to trigger a full-scale intervention, and if the player ignores this advice and attempts to arrest the Hardie Boys, this will trigger a nonstandard game-over with a newspaper report stating that Harry's (and Kim's if he was there at the time) dead bodies were found floating in the canal. This is not to suggest that the RCM do not wield power—they do—but the limits of that power are both very apparent and yet somewhat unclear.

The primary organization checking the power of the RCM is the Dockworker's Union, who are the second major policing organization in the game. Their legal counselor Elisabeth quickly informs you that "[t]he district of Martinaise does not recognize your authority to make arrests," and Titus Hardie—the leader of the Hardie Boys—warns you, "[Y]ou've heard everything a *rent-a-cop* is gonna hear from us *real* law officials. You're lucky you didn't get a beating."

The Hardie Boys explicitly recognize themselves as the legitimate policing authority in Martinaise; it is on such terms that they attempt to claim responsibility for the murder:

*Harry/You*: "What we do is *different*. We enforce the law. You just kill people like it's nothing."
*Titus*: "But you see, a *law*, lawman ... is something people agree upon. And here in Martinaise we agreed that this man had to die."
*Harry/You*: "Why did you kill him?"
*Titus*: "Why?" he hisses through his teeth. "Because he was worthless mercenary scum—*and* he stepped out of line. In *my* town."

Over the course of the game, you have conversations with Martinaise residents who do explicitly place their trust and faith in the Union—who believe that, while they are not perfect, they are a preferable alternative to the RCM and Coalition. And we do find several examples of the Union supporting Martinaise residents in ways the Coalition will not, protecting the local community from the ravages of international capital.

However, as Evan Bernick observes, the Hardie Boys "are not the Black Panthers or Young Lords" (2021, 25). They spend far more time getting drunk than they do helping people. At a later point in the game, we learn about Union leader Evart Claire's plans to gentrify the area around a fishing village near to the docks to make way for a "worker's palace," plans that are "chilling for their lack of consideration of what anyone in the area he is about to transform for the purportedly better might think about what trade-offs he is making" (Bernick 2021, 8). If the RCM functions as an allegory for the role of the police within a colonial/capitalist international system, the Union prompts critical engagement with leftist projects that promise liberation while in reality serving the interests of an elite. The Union's stated aims are noble, as are some of their actions, but we soon start to see a more complex

picture emerge. And it is by establishing itself as a policing organization that the Union ensures its power in the district.

The third major policing organization in the game is the group of mercenaries from the company Krenel, dispatched to Martinaise to suppress the strike. If the Union teases at a more legitimate form of policing than the RCM, the mercenaries imply something far worse. They are the raw violence of international capital. We learn from Joyce that Krenel are a private military contractor who have operated in "all the good conflict corridors." The player can meet one of the mercenaries outside the factory gate, pretending to be a scab and inflaming tensions. One of the mercenaries, Lely, is the game's principal murder victim, and the other two are now conducting an investigation into the killing, following which they will execute those they deem responsible. Even though the Wild Pines corporation has hired Krenel, Joyce is unable to call them off; they have "gone to ground." She warns Harry and Kim that the mercenaries view the RCM as "vigilantes" and "ghetto savages." The Union has the capacity to limit the RCM's interventions in Martinaise, but it cannot contend with the well-trained, well-armed, unrestrained mercenaries:

*Kim*: "The Débardeurs[1] have over two thousand men. It will be a thousand to one."
*Joyce*: "Have you ever seen a hornet invade a beehive, lieutenant?" She leans back. "It's not pretty."

Depending on your skill checks and Harry and Kim's successes in solving the murder you might be able to prevent the mercenaries from killing *all* the Hardie Boys, but they will almost certainly kill some and potentially injure Kim too.

Krenel are clearly supposed to represent private military companies such as Blackwater, and the widespread use of such organizations to administer corporate and state violence.[2] That this violence has, in this context, moved from "third- or fourth- world countries" (Joyce) to the (desperate edges of the) metropole, evokes the colonial boomerang dynamic wherein policing practices are developed in the global periphery and travel back to the core (Césaire 2000; Chowdhury 2021). There is a long history of metropolitan police forces using tactics developed in colonial wars to suppress union organizing (Williams 2015). Here we see policing as a form of warfare against marginalized populations, geared toward managing and eradicating threats to the existing order (Manchanda and Rossdale 2021).

*Disco Elysium* thus mobilizes a critical reading of policing organizations, setting out how these are more concerned with upholding exploitative systems than attending to the needs of ordinary people. The narrative makes continual and barbed references to disjunctures between the lofty proclamations and the violent and corrupt realities that characterize policing. It therefore goes some way to challenging established ideas about the social role of the police. However, the game's attention to the violence of policing goes beyond straightforward analogies (Kirby 2017). It is as the game draws players into a strange and discomforting relationship with the politics and promises of mastery that its more fundamental challenges emerge.

## 10.2 "A stupid fantasy of a man"

*Disco Elysium* circles around interlocking themes of failure and mastery. Revachol itself is a city starkly marked by failure. The revolution failed. The Coalition has failed. Martinaise has been failed. The RCM fail. And you, Harry, are a failure. Crucially, however, none of these are *complete* failures. The revolution lives on. The Coalition's failures are not unproductive. The RCM play their role. And neither Harry nor Martinaise is beyond hope. The player too is implicated in this cycle; skill checks in the game fail constantly, and the player is encouraged to embrace this dimension, to find alternative solutions for problems, to level up certain of Harry's traits, or—most affectingly—to resist the urge to reload the game following disastrous outcomes and instead to continue on in a more painful world.

The game's explorations of failure are set in motion through its critical engagement with the idea and practice of mastery. Both policing as a practice and detective fiction as a genre are fundamentally projects of mastery, concerned with the imposition of order and control onto the unruly and irrational. And the game brings you into contact with a number of aspirant masters, including the unseen (the Coalition airships hanging in the air) and the intimate (Kim, Joyce, Evart). However, the game also subverts mastery, meditating on its harmful implications and gesturing toward the political possibilities of *unmasterful* practice. It does this by examining the violence that inheres in circulations of mastery and failure, through gameplay mechanics that subvert the player's expectations, and through Harry's absurd un/mastery.

The game presents us with a series of masterful gestures, all of which are contoured by their own failure. At the macro-political level we have the Coalition, who intervened to crush the revolution and subsequently imposed a free-market system on Revachol. This is, of course, a masterful gesture that closely resembles colonial projects in the real world. As discussed earlier, what is notable about this masterful gesture is that its establishment in Martinaise is limited. The RCM, the Coalition's enforcement arm, is not able to fully exercise its authority in the district, and the Coalition's laws are not properly enforced. This is clearly not a question of incapacity; if it was so inclined, the Coalition could almost certainly intervene more decidedly in Martinaise. The situation is closer to what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has called "organised abandonment"; a concept used to point "to the way in which organisations, state and otherwise, manage their activities in such a way as to render groups of people irrelevant in their calculations" (Bhandar 2018; see also Gilmore 2022). Martinaise, the center of the crushed revolution, has not been allowed to develop past its desperate state. The RCM are tasked with maintaining that condition, while Krenel mercenaries have been dispatched to undermine the power of organized labor in the district. The ageing fascist René even (somewhat approvingly) suggests that the district has been left as a warning, a "monument." Which is to say that this apparent failure of mastery on the part of the Coalition should not be read as unproductive; rather, this is a form of mastery through failure.

Within that context, the game's various policing organizations are implicated in an ongoing cycle of mastery and failure. The RCM have a substantial amount of discretionary power both within and beyond the law, but their capacity to exercise this is severely limited. The Union have more popular legitimacy, but just three mercenaries on the loose present them with an existential challenge. And yet one of those mercenaries has been murdered by—we eventually discover—a jealous communist on an island. All these organizations must contend with the haunting presence of their own failure, while those around them must contend with the volatility of an aspirant master confronting its limits. As Gilmore writes, "even in the throes of periodic abandonment, elites rely on structures of order and significance that the anarchy of racial capitalism can never guarantee" (2022, 481). The drive to mastery is always more unstable than its proponents believe; it is always incomplete. What we have instead is a dialectic of mastery and failure. The desire to master, the project of mastery and the failures that inhere are primary sites of modern violence.

That violence is manifest here not only through the enduring preservation of an order characterized by poverty and dispossession. This status quo is fundamentally unstable; this world is deteriorating. That is immediately apparent at a political and economic level, but as the game progresses and we learn more about the growing tears in the fabric of reality, it becomes clear that this deterioration is also metaphysical. The world is falling apart, and the game's masters/police have no apparent interest in addressing that reality. Instead, their projects involve ignoring, obscuring, profiting from or managing the orderly progression of that deterioration. In this sense, then, far from preserving the *status quo*, the imposition of "order" that is the desire, fantasy and promise of mastery can be understood as a way of practically and psychologically offsetting deterioration. Insofar as it remains willfully insensitive to deterioration, mastery appears as ridiculous, desperate and destined to fail—but no less dangerous for that.

As the game reflects cycles of mastery and violence that will feel familiar to those of us consigned to inhabit this other world, it invites the player to inhabit an unmasterful posture. To an important extent this involves some genre confusion. Detective fiction is supposed to invite us into a project of mastery. Through the slow-brewing mastery of the detective-hero and the steady accumulation of knowledge, we expect to journey from confusion to coherence. Apparently incompatible accounts of preceding events will be resolved into a singular and objective narrative, allowing the present to tame the unruly past (Novitz 2021). The genre maintains the idea of policing as an apolitical practice of imposing order onto chaos. *Disco Elysium* upends these tropes.

The game does provide a multitude of information, but in a manner that is frequently overwhelming, obscure or irrelevant; knowledge does not lead to control. The past will not be tamed; it constantly intervenes and haunts, rupturing the present such that the final resolution to the mystery cannot be solved through deductive brilliance because it involves the insurrection of histories (and dimensions) we have not yet encountered. And of course, Harry is explicitly not the

detective-hero of the stories—something he himself acknowledges in a conversation about detective fiction:

*Annette*: "Didn't meant to offend, sir, sorry, sir. It's just that you don't look like Dick Mullen." She points to a book cover, on which you see a strapping Vespertine officer. He stands grimly over the body of a dead woman.
*You*: "You know, nobody actually looks like the guy in the picture. That's just a stupid fantasy of a man."

Julian Novitz argues that *Disco Elysium*, with its unstable protagonist, collapsing boundaries of past and present, and haunting presence of the irrational and monstrous, is more akin to gothic than detective fiction. While some criticized the game as a work of detective fiction because, in the final revelation, the killer turns out to be a character we had not met (and so the sophisticated reader could not figure out the solution for themselves), Novitz suggests that this is precisely the point: the intervention of the irrational and monstrous, "undermining the player's expectations of development towards mastery" (2021, 36).

The game mechanics play an integral role in this unsettling of the traditional detective story, drawing the player into an intimate experience of confusion and failure. There is a double subversion at play; games, like detective stories, are usually objects and projects of mastery, with the thrill of gameplay achieved in part through the development of control over the game's systems. This is especially the case for role-playing games, wherein the process of accumulating experience, knowledge and skills leads to mastery (Novitz 2021, 36). But in *Disco Elysium*, leveling up amplifies the different and often competing voices in Harry's head. The advice they offer becomes louder and more frequent in a manner that is often overwhelming as the player is invited further into Harry's fractured, confused mind. Their advice is also often bad; higher levels do not straightforwardly bring more control over situations. At an early point in the game, if the player passes a very difficult suggestion skill check, they can inappropriately proposition one of the characters. In most games, passing such a check would magically induce the other character into bed, but here she rebuffs Harry's (skillful, but failed) advance; the player is warned at this early stage that these checks do not equate to mastery. Novitz thus classifies the game as "ludic-gothic," recognizing that "rather than acting as simply gameplay tools to aid the player's advancement, the skills and attributes ... threaten to impinge on the player's agency, creating the appropriately Gothic sense of not being entirely in control" (37)

Failure is integral to the experience of playing *Disco Elysium*. It is certainly possible to "get good" at the game, to learn its systems and maximize your level, to achieve some kind of mastery, but the game mitigates against this. Instead, the player is invited to lean into failure, to give up the fantasy of mastering the game. The fact that skill checks are governed by dice rolls means that apparently simple actions can lead to failure. Even with a few points in Endurance, the player can still find Harry repeatedly throwing up when trying to take the dead body down from the tree. More distressingly, a late-game failed Authority check will see Kim shot by

one of the mercenaries. Some of these checks can be repeated, but others—including the check to save Kim—cannot. While players may reload their save files and try again, the game saves some of its most insightful and tender content for those who accept these failures and proceed onward.

The game therefore invites the player to adopt an *unmasterful* posture, to be vulnerable to giving up control, to not-knowing, to failing—and responds to that failure with depth and comradeship. It is Jack Halberstam who invites us to "read failure ... as a refusal of mastery" and as a "critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit" (2011, 11–12):

> Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world ... failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods.
>
> (Halberstam 2011, 2–3)

The game has a somewhat anarchic and even anarchistic ethos, agitating against the passage of totalizing frameworks and masterful pursuits. In the player's frustrated expectations of control and mastery, and consignment to failure, we are called to examine how the destructive aspirations toward mastery at play in Revachol also structure our own expectations and desires, of both culture and politics. It's not clear that we can entirely detach ourselves from these aspirations, but the game does provoke us to adopt a disruptive posture in relation to them—to attend to what that desire is doing, to unsettle the fantasy of control.

As the game invites us into playing out a critique of a detective story, it gives us an avatar who is a walking parody of the idea that the police engage in mastery. Harry's lack of mastery over himself and the world around him is most immediately a function of his amnesia, which renders the world as strange to him as to the player, but we soon discover that he was not much better before this latest binge. It is worth acknowledging that the game's stakes in highlighting the limits of self-mastery extend far beyond the police. Our privileged insights into Harry's psyche reveal the deeper fiction behind all performances of self-mastery. Modernity has elevated the idea of self-mastery as a supreme virtue, whereby the rational man, in command of both mind and body, can exert and extend that control more widely. But this, of course, is a stupid fantasy of a man. Harry shows us the dirty little secret of modernity; the self is confused, multiple, always engaged in an uncertain act of imposing coherence, at root a mess of libidinal, animal drives. Lying in bed each night, Harry is taunted by his Lizard Brain; in this, for sure, he is not alone.

As a police officer, this scandalous unmastery is a problem. Herein lies the source of Kim's initial discomfort: in possession of neither his faculties nor his gun and badge, Harry is not a fit representation of police authority. Harry can attempt to present himself as masterful, but this is generally a somewhat absurd performance.

For instance, a common dialogue option for introductions is for him to declare "I am the law," usually to understated or bemused responses:

*Annette*: "You don't look much like a policeman." She examines you, as if to find something policeman-like.

Or:

*Tommy*: "You sure are, my man." He nods emphatically.
*Kim*: "Yes, people get that you are *the law*. You really don't have to keep saying it."

Harry does have successes as an officer, but these are rarely a result of rational processes. They are often straightforwardly absurd. For instance, if your field autopsy of the dead body is inconclusive (as is almost certainly the case), it is possible to store the body in a large fridge in the shape of an ice bear that you find in a nearby basement. This buys valuable time and may well allow you to discover that the victim was shot rather than hanged, but it sits uneasily with Kim.

*Kim*: "Beautiful," he says, wiping his hands in his handkerchief. "A dead body in an ice bear fridge—this is some of the best police work I've ever done."
*Harry/You*: "Really? You think it's good work?"
*Kim*: "No. Not really. Look at that! What have we done? We stuffed a *dead body in an ice bear fridge*. This story does not leave this room."
*Harry/You*: "This isn't police work, Kim. It's *art*. We're *artists* and this was our vision."
*Kim*: "If I were an artist, this would certainly *not* be my vision. I would be much, much more conservative in my work."

As indicated in the story about Leslie and Burke, others of Harry's successes are a function of violent contingency rather than mastery.

The game does a delicate job of allowing the player to delight in the often hilarious consequences of Harry's attempts to engage in proper police work and even to take him on something of a redemptive journey, while occasionally referencing the more chilling aspects of his past. For instance, if the player-as-Harry keeps apologizing in conversations, they can internalize the rigorous self-critique thought, the text of which reads:

> Here it is. Hard facts from the man you are. You once jerked off in the locker room and were caught. You held a young woman by the arm and kept her in your apartment for 20 minutes against her will. That's right, these are not flights of fancy. These are *real deeds*, Harry, emerging from the darkness of your past. You tried shooting a fleeing suspect in the foot but hit him in the pelvis, crippling him for life. And above all, you let life defeat you.

Policing is a project of mastery, and like all projects of mastery it is haunted by its incessant failures. Those subject to police authority must contend with the violence that flows from this dialectic of success and failure. Harry's avowed status as a master/police officer is absurd, but that absurdity is nevertheless shaped by the institutional power he occasionally manages to wield and the violence he is sometimes able to deploy.

There is some indication in the game that Harry's brokenness is at least in part a consequence of his police work. During the conversation with Annette about detective fiction, the Shelf of Crime Novels speaks to us:

> Crime fiction ... is a disgrace. An asinine misrepresentation of the physical attributes and the arduous everyday work of actual police officers.
>
> These books *greatly* overstate the excitement of police work, glossing over how long it takes to actually follow up on leads and eliminate dead-ends.
>
> They completely ignore the psychological hardships of, year after year, coming into contact with people during the worst days of their lives.
>
> Not a single mention of all the stress this work creates upon the officer's *family*. Detective fiction just doesn't tell the truth at all. Now, would you like a list of the books found on the shelf?

A combination of Kim and Harry's Esprit De Corps brings this closer to home when telling amnesiac Harry about his home precinct:

*Kim*: "It's a *tough* station to work in. You have all of Jamrock to cover—that district should have *three* precincts, but money is what it is."
*Esprit De Corps*: It's no wonder you are like you are, he thinks.

It seems plausible that the trauma of police work, in combination with heartbreak and substance abuse, has been integral to Harry's journey into madness. In conversation with Kim, we also learn that Harry has twice refused a promotion that would have moved him off the streets and into a desk job. His relationship with police work thus appears as analogous with his harmful and compulsive relationship with other dangerous substances. What makes Harry such a decorated officer may be precisely what has made his life so tragic. Read thus, Harry's failures are only fully intelligible within the context of his (structural and personal) project of mastery.

This deterioration is also reflected in the character known as the Pigs, who eventually turns up with Harry's gun (alongside a whole collection of police gear). The Pigs, real name Marianne LaPlante, believes that she is a police officer, and can be found on the boardwalk, "[a] mountain of police paraphernalia" (Narrator), "trapped in a world of blue and red lights" (Inland Empire). The Pigs' delusions of being a police officer seem to have come about through a combination of loneliness

and incessant listening to Channel 8, a radio station that plays cop shows. You can discuss the Pigs with the Hardie Boys, who are keen to look out for her:

*YOU*: "How did she get like this?"
*TITUS HARDIE*: "Get wanting to be a cop, you mean? Well, she ..." He furrows his brow in thought. "Shit, I don't actually know. Anyone know why she started acting like a pig?"
*ALAIN*: "No fuckin' clue," the tattooed man shouts. "It's gotta be the crazy. Who'd *want* to be a pig?"

If Harry evokes the precarious, deteriorating nature of the human subject, always in uncertain relationship with its animality, The Pigs is the terrible acceleration of these specters. And as she stands for the deterioration of humanity, she arrives at the figure of the cop-as-pig. That she has come to this state through incessant consumption of "cop shows" is a ludicrous extension of the game's repeated barbs at the genre, while reflecting the dangerous fantasies always at play in policing.

## 10.3 "Despite an unconventional approach, you're doing good police work"

Despite the strong critiques of policing expressed in *Disco Elysium*, the game retains something of a romantic affection for "proper" police work (read: patient, sensible, humane detective work, and community-accountable security), even if it acknowledges that the structural constraints operating on actually existing policing organizations render this the exception rather than the norm. At times the shortcomings of Harry, the RCM and to a lesser extent the Union are highlighted by pointing out how a more honorable policing force would deal with a situation—the ideal police contrasting with Revachol's decidedly non-ideal version. Thus, even as *Disco Elysium* unsettles the masterful politics of policing, there are ways in which it also retains a fidelity to both policing and mastery, in a manner that demonstrates something of the power of both in the social imagination.

Kim is the central vehicle for the game's more affirmative encounters with mastery. His calmness, patience and tolerance—often in the face of racism, absurdity and metaphysical rupture—are a continual theme. This impressive self-mastery is demonstrated in an exchange on the first night, when he smokes on the balcony of the hostel while debriefing with Harry. Kim explains that he cannot offer Harry a cigarette because he only has one with him—he has exactly one cigarette every night. Harry asks, "How did you get so cool, Kim?," precipitating revealing responses from Kim as well as two of Harry's internal systems:

*Kim*: The light of his cigarette illuminates a fleeting smile. "You mean this?" He flicks the ash. "This isn't cool—it's an unnecessary trial of will. And unhealthy."
*Volition*: Keeping the habit within the parameters he's given himself takes a lot of focus. It would be easier to simply quit.

*Composure*: Yet were he to quit, he would lose the cool factor. This man relishes his cool quite a bit—below it all.

Kim makes moderation look easy, but here we get a glimpse into the considerable work required to keep it together in a world that is falling apart. A similar labor of moderation is present in Kim's analysis of the political situation in Revachol. He is not unaware of the ways Martinaise has been failed and the harmful effects of the RCM, and not especially optimistic about the prospects for change. Nevertheless, he concentrates on the control he *can* exert on situations: he takes his notes, follows procedures carefully and continues to provide Harry with sage and sensible advice even as the mystery takes incomprehensible turns. For better or worse, in a fundamentally irrational and slowly deteriorating world, he has attained some form of self-mastery.

Over the course of the game, Kim is able to support Harry in getting his life back on track. While the player can resolutely refuse to allow Harry to make responsible decisions, the game guides players toward a more redemptive arc in which Harry learns his identity, quits drinking and eventually manages to solve the case. Kim's encouragement through this process is infectious. While he is decidedly moderate, he is also profoundly human, offering sympathy, second chances and occasional consent to whimsy as befits situations. As such, his approval—when it comes—feels genuine and hard won. As the player, it *feels* really good to win Kim's trust. Helping Harry get his life back on track becomes the instinctive pathway.

And yet, Kim's mastery is also undone by Harry. While his early responses to Harry's evident unmastery consist of thinly veiled horror, he slowly grows to place more trust in Harry, a process accelerated once he learns about Harry's case success rate. He senses that Harry's unconventional conversational style might push those they interview to reveal more information than they intended, he learns to respect Harry's flashes of inspiration (such as, subject to skill checks, intuiting that the murder victim was killed by shooting, not hanging), and—over the course of the game—he realizes that Harry's instincts to pursue what seem like irrelevancies are better attuned to the needs of the case than first appeared. It is Harry's search for a mysterious cryptid, in collaboration with the also unmasterful character Lena, that reveals the apparent impossibility that sits at the heart of the mystery. In the magical encounter with the cryptid, we learn that the murderer, Iosef Lilianovich Dros, was under the influence of the mystical Insulindian Phasmid. This explanation lies beyond rational and human limits, but Kim takes it surprisingly well. It is not certain that Kim will still be around to witness this encounter; it will only happen if the player-as-Harry has been able to gain Kim's trust and thus save him from the mercenaries. Kim's reward for this trust is both his physical safety and a deep metaphysical rupture.

Ultimately, the game nudges toward a sort of reconciliation between mastery and unmastery, as embodied through Kim and Harry respectively. Kim's mastery is undone by Harry, while Harry—no longer bingeing, rediscovering his identity, confronting his demons—is guided back together by Kim. The ultimate conclusion of

that pathway, an emotional payoff in the closing moments of the game, sees Kim accept an invitation to join Harry's police precinct. This is a fascinating and ultimately frustrating resolution to the critical engagement with policing and mastery present in the game; policing has been critiqued as a project of mastery but rehabilitated through a balancing act: Kim and Harry, order and chaos, rationality and irrationality, mastery and unmastery.[3] While this in no way presents as a legitimation of the RCM—its structural role has been too thoroughly debunked by the game—it tempers the wider challenge to policing and mastery developed in the game.

## 10.4 Conclusion

Very few video games succeed in exploring their themes in a manner that coheres across narrative and gameplay. That it does this so well is one of the remarkable achievements of *Disco Elysium*. It sets up and then subverts the conventions of detective fiction, undermining the player's expectations of development toward mastery and instead compelling an encounter with failure and contingency. The game's critical perspectives on the police are driven by and given force through the combination of its ludic and narrative treatment of mastery and failure.

It is frustrating that the game ultimately blunts the force of these critiques, but also generative. That component of the ending unsettles a straightforward reading, reminds us that there is no singular meaning to discover and reveals the creative labor of interpretation. It also showcases the power of both policing and mastery. That the designers were compelled—for whatever reason—to center the police in the story's redemptive arc, despite what has come before, precisely demonstrates the challenge facing the abolitionist project of disrupting the status of policing in the social and cultural imagination. That this redemption arrives through softening the subversion of mastery brings us back to Singh. Mastery is not something that can easily be disavowed—its status in political thought is too deep-rooted for that. Unthinking mastery involves a continual process of unsettling that status and an ongoing inquiry into its reemergence. *Disco Elysium*, in all its confusion, encourages and rewards both.

## Notes

1. Dockworkers. ⏎
2. We learn that Krenel changed their name from Deepwell—this is a clear reference both to Blackwater and to Blackwater (now Academi)'s use of name changes to disassociate themselves from massacres carried out by the company's employees (Scahill 2008). ⏎
3. If you fail to save Kim from the mercenaries, you may be able to take the foul-mouthed child Cuno as your companion for the closing stages of the story. If you do this, subject to skill checks, he too can be invited to join the RCM. It is notable that these two sharply diverging pathways converge on this point. ⏎

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# 11 Vows of blööd and flesh

## The aggrieved entitlements of fascist ideology in *Disco Elysium*

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### Introduction

"Why being a Fascist hurts?" asked one confused user of the *Disco Elysium* subreddit (RiteClicker 2019). The question referenced *Revacholian Nationhood* in the game's Thought Cabinet, where the player curates the collection of ideas that shape the internal life of the main character. *Revacholian Nationhood* opens to the player character if they have continuously expressed hostility to women, foreigners or any other number of "Others" in the game world. Thus, they become marked by the game as a possible adherent of fascist ideology. Accepting and internalizing the thought puts the player on a fascist playthrough and from that point on, each time that the player chooses to express nationalist ideas, they start suffering damage to their Morale stat ("Revacholian Nationhood" 2020). Fascism in *Disco Elysium* is therefore the political ideology of harm, self-harm included. To be a fascist is to suffer degradation and mockery.

This chapter explores what the game says about fascism as an ideology. I argue that through the use of satire and mockery, the game elucidates the rhetorical and mental strategies of both fascism in particular and right-wing ideology more generally. The game provides a simulation of radicalization, showing how individual regressive sentiments are seized by right-wing movements and given more wide-reaching ideological implications. This is one of the classic functions of video games, as instead of *representing* phenomena, they reproduce—that is, *simulate*—them in an active interaction between the player and the algorithmic principles of the game (Aarseth 2007; Frasca 2003; Ryan 2006; Karhulahti 2015).

Fascism is only one of the many ideologies the game offers, and in many accounts, it appears to be the least popular among the player base. The Achievement statistics page of the digital storefront Steam shows "Truly Rabid 'Traditionalist' " as by far the least popular ideological achievement, only unlocked by 11.4% of the player base at the time of writing (the equivalent achievement is at 26.7% for communism, 23.7% for moralism and 17.9% for ultraliberalism) ("Global Gameplay Stats: Disco Elysium"). Fascism is also unique in its gameplay ramifications. While each ideology comes with a collection of perks and drawbacks, fascism is the only one where the perk appears quite niche (and quite pathetic in its implications, a bonus to Physique skills when under the influence of alcohol) in comparison to a debilitating drawback. To be a fascist in the game is to suffer each time one speaks of the keystone tenet of their ideology—the nation-state. Letting one's Morale fall to zero leads to game over, meaning the player has to either refrain from espousing these ideas or constantly medicate their Morale using various drugs available. Frankly, it is a rather difficult and miserable way of playing the game.

Simultaneously, the fascist version of the main detective, Harry Du Bois, is constantly barraged with the frustrated disproval of his partner Kim Kitsuragi, who makes no qualms about pointing out both the bigotry and ridiculousness behind the player character's ideology. The mockery the game levels at fascism invites players to reflect upon its nature and on right-wing politics more generally. In the case

of the confused Reddit user quoted in the opening, one respondent noted that fascists "have a perverse relationship with their beliefs" which force them into constant rationalizations until eventually the inconsistencies start eating them from inside. According to one commenter, fascism is an ideology of brutality that makes people suppress their compassion, causing self-harm in the process. Another noted the incompatibility of fascist ideals with the lived reality of Revachol (RiteClicker 2019). Reminiscing about return to nationalist glory in this setting is presented as a form of political masochism.

My article explores the logic of fascism specifically and right-wing ideology more generally in *Disco Elysium* as it emerges through grievance. Fascism is shown to be an ideology of loss and disempowerment, which draws those who believe that their lot in life is different to what they are owed. This makes it a fairly natural ideology for Harry who begins the game at a rock bottom following an alcohol- and drug-infused bender with a painfully failed marriage looming over him like a malicious curse. He clings to a bygone era of disco superstars for meaning. In a final discussion with the figment of his wife toward the end of the game, a fascist Harry can admit that he used fascism to repair himself after his wife's departure, only for the rug to be pulled from under him. The implication is that while fascism pretended to offer solutions, it only broke him further and, "the cracks were all there ever was" (ID 767–472, 767–398, 767–633). It promises meaning through the act of taking the "vows of blööd [*sic*] and flesh" (ID 531–41), as the game describes one's introduction to fascism. Yet ultimately, the ideology proves hollow.

Harnessing this sense of imagined loss and grievance has been essential to the success of radical right-wing ideologies both in the past and present (Paxton 2004; Stanley 2020). Such movements use the rhetoric of an unfolding crisis—whether real or imagined—which threatens all their adherents hold dear (Kallis 2015). Looking at contemporary right-wing movements, Michael Kimmel (2017) has used the phrase *aggrieved entitlement* to characterize the emotional tone behind right-wing reactionary masculinity in particular. The concept emphasizes that it is rarely those lowest in societal hierarchies, that is, the truly marginalized, who are the core constituents of radical right-wing ideology. Instead, these movements galvanize those who feel entitled to positions of prestige in society and harness their animosity from being denied this position. Thus, they claim to speak for the common people by railing against "the elites" or "the Establishment" (Eco 1995, 6–7; Stanley 2020, xxxi–xxxii). This is a cornerstone idea even for more moderate forms of conservatism, which Corey Robin (2018) has defined as "a mediation on—and the theoretical rendition of—the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back" (4).

The materials for this chapter consist of a playthrough where I molded my character to the game's coding of fascism. I followed the principle of "close-gaming" where a scholar conducts an almost ethnographical study of the game world, using themselves as a probe (Arjoranta 2015). In a role-playing game fashion, I decided on certain principles that would guide my character through the choices presented (Heliö 2004, 70–71). From my previous experience with the game, I knew that it codes fascism into physical attributes, so I prioritized Physique as my main statistic. However, as each playthrough only depicts a singular portrait of the game, which emerges out of the interaction between the game and the player, I enhance my analysis via Disco Reader—an unofficial search engine that contains visualizations of all the dialogue trees in the game. This allows me to look at all the different conversational branches that even multiple playthroughs might not capture and see the conditions that unlock different paths. In citing dialogue from the game, I refer to this tool, where the first number is the ID for the larger conversation and second marks a specific line. I have also investigated the *Disco Elysium* subreddit for discussions on fascism and use my findings to complement the primary text.

I begin with how the game first introduces fascism as a potential ideology. I look at how it incorporates Harry's chosen statements into wider ideological patterns and how these patterns then start shaping Harry's worldview. Next, I explore the internal logic of fascism through the four primary NPCs who represent different facets of fascism in the game world: Jean-Luc Measurehead is a towering racial supremacist übermensch with bizarre racial theories, but instead of the White Aryan dream-man of the Nazis, he is a Black-coded man insulting the racial purity of White people. The character

known simply as "Racist Lorry Driver" represents the more populist, blue collar expressions of fascism. Gary, the cryptofascist, is a conspiracy theorist locked into "alternative" media sources, therefore representing a younger, more media-savvy constituent of fascism, particularly associated with the "Alt Right." Finally, René Arnoux is an embittered old royalist pining for the gone-by glory days of the Old Regime brought down by the communist revolution, harking back to the image of Edmund Burke—often hailed as the first modern conservative. Together, these four show a cross-section of different constituencies and factions of fascism that the game webs into a singular ideology. My analysis highlights two tactics and ideological maneuvers integral to the workings of fascist logic: (1) rhetorical doublespeak, which is used to hide fascism from those not privy to its inner workings and (2) metaphors of warfare as instrumental to fascist thinking. Throughout, I continue to investigate how it actually *feels* to play as a fascist in *Disco Elysium*.

## 11.1 Fäcing crisis in the land of wö-men

In his classic study of fascism, Robert Paxton (2004) argues that in practice it is often a fluid ideology. Similarly, *Disco Elysium* presents a multifaceted account of the logic of fascism. It is not preoccupied with orthodoxy—that is, in making fascism a coherent, non-contradictory ideology—but rather in highlighting the messy parts of political thinking. This is particularly relevant to fascism, as Paxton notes:

> Fascism in power is a compound, a powerful amalgam of different but marriageable conservative, national-socialist, and radical Right ingredients, bonded together by common enemies and common passions for a regenerated, energized, and purified nation at whatever cost to free institutions and the rule of law.
>
> (207)

Thus, fascism is less about coherent ideology and more about harnessing a collection of ideological impulses. This represents well the depiction of fascism in the game, as each of the four NPCs offers a vastly different portrayal of what it means to be a fascist. What combines them is a sense of resentment.

Fascism in *Disco Elysium* lacks the playfully aestheticized characteristics that Kari Kallioniemi and Kimi Kärki (2019) have found to dominate popular culture. Referencing the classic essay by Susan Sontag (1975), they speak of an eerie fascination with fascism that revels in authoritarian aesthetics while still depicting it as a form of inhumane evil. A potential academic parallel is perhaps what Cas Mudde (2010) has dubbed "normal pathology" approach to studying the extreme right, which sees fascism as an abnormality and a foreign deviation from the mainstream value systems of liberal democracies (1168–70). Meanwhile, an alternate approach which Mudde names "pathological normalcy" emphasizes that extreme right ideologies rather radicalize tenets already present in society (1178–80). One approach sees fascism as something bizarre; the other as a vile exaggeration of the commonplace.

*Disco Elysium*'s approach to fascism appears more closely aligned with the latter. Becoming a fascist in the game involves repeatedly making misogynist or racist statements and then, when prompted, accepting that these statements might be telling of a deeper ideological leaning. Throughout the game, Harry converses with a number of voices in his head, amounting to a cluster of competing consciousness, each corresponding to a specific skill that the player can improve via skill points. Each skill comes with a personality of its own, a rhetorical register and—in some cases—ideological leaning. For fascism, its spokesperson skill is Endurance. It is interesting to note that it is often physical skills in the game that correspond with fascist, misogynist or racist dialogue options.

Thus, fascism is a deeply bodily ideology in the game. When Endurance first speaks about fascism, Harry wonders if he might be having "some kind of stomach seizure" (ID 531–31). Being a fascist is described as speaking "stomach truths" (ID 531–39). The depiction of fascism as a bodily function in this way resonates with Umberto Eco's (1995) third feature of "Ur-Fascism," which describes it as the "cult of *action for action's sake*. Action being beautiful in itself, it must be taken before, or without, any

previous reflection" (6; emphasis in the original). Fascism's location in the physical attributes of the character, rather than mental, emphasizes its tactile, actionable qualities.

Later, Endurance reminds Harry of this: "Remember, brother, you say the hard things—the göód things. Most folk haven't got the stomach for it" (ID 320–285). Thus, the mentality of a fascist is to view oneself as a truth-speaker, saying out loud the things others dare not utter. This aligns with the real-world right-wing project of presenting oneself as a rebel willing to go against prevalent opinions—manufactured by "the elite"—and speak the dangerous truths. By creating a sense that prevalent culture stifles the range of available expressions, right-wing figures are depicting open bigotry as courageous transgression (see for instance, Stanley 2020, 82–83). The game openly presents this and mocks this by taking the most pathetic things Harry or other fascist figures can utter and depicting them as "stomach truths" that few dare say.

Fascism is introduced to Harry via language of crisis: "Evening falls" (ID 531–49). Endurance then invites him to take "the Vows of Blööd and Flesh" (ID 531–41). The excessive and incorrect usage of umlauts is really one of the few aesthetic elements given to fascism in the game. The practice is likely a reference to heavy metal culture, where using additional umlauts in band and song names has a history spanning to Blue Öyster Cult, Motörhead and Mötley Crüe. Although the exact origin of the habit is somewhat disputed, it often traces to Blue Öyster Cult for whom according to one story it was suggested because of metal music's "Wagnerian aspect" (Rampton 2020). According to Keith Kahn-Harris (2021), excessive umlauts in metal flirted with vague Germanic influences and added the cultural signifier of "Teutonic heaviness." However, this was done in a highly Anglo-centric manner. The umlauts were never intended to alter the pronunciation of the word. Referencing heavy metal's tendency to flirt with aesthetics of evil, Kahn-Harris writes: "One of the accomplishments of this vagueness is to allow for the frisson of association with the great unmentionable evil of the Nazis, without actually becoming a Nazi" (2021). *Disco Elysium* uses this popular cultural association for purposes of humor and mockery. The umlauts attempt to give the teachings of fascism a more ancient gravitas—ritualistic vows that one must undertake. Yet the superficiality of their use undermines the practice, instead highlighting the silliness of rationalizing basic misogyny and racism as some sort of ancient wisdom.

During Harry's induction into fascism, Endurance pulls back the curtains on the ideology, saying fascism is, "Many things, but it's mostly about trusting your gut. Who does your gut tell you is the source of Revachol's problems?" (ID 531–8). Fascism is shown as pure, gut-based antagonism. Its main feature is the question of who to blame. Harry is given four options: "Foreigners" (ID 531–10), "Liberals" (ID 531–38), "Leftist Academics" (ID 531–18) and "Financiers" (ID 531–44). No matter which option he chooses, Endurance affirms it as correct (ID 531–32) but notes that there is an even deeper target:

> ... wömen ... Wö-Men. Men of Wö. You don't like them. They're insane. Their idiocy needs to be scrubbed off this world with rubbing alcohol. Wömen need to go back to the fucking kitchen... . That's what fascism boils down to. The rest is also important, but the *main thing* is that women need to *know their place*.
>
> (ID 531–46, 531–44, 531–5)

Thus, women are the ultimate scapegoat that the reactionary right-wing turn against. Fascism is shown to be fundamentally rooted in misogyny, seeking to control women and curtail their autonomy.

In her work on the logic of misogyny, Kate Manne (2018) differentiates between "the naïve conception of misogyny" and a more expansive understanding. The first sees it simply as hatred of women. The second produces a more systemic account, seeing it as a political system aiming to police and enforce gender hierarchy where women are subordinate to male dominance (32–33). The ultimate value system underneath is a form of male supremacism which is based on the belief that (cis gendered) men should hold dominion in society (Carian, DiBranco, and Ebin 2022, vii).

Among the fascist NPCs, these roots of male entitlement are most evident in the Racist Lorry Driver. His body image issues have turned into resentments over his lack of dating success. He feels entitled to sex and access to women and becomes aggrieved when women deny him (ID 849–32, 849–9). These

resentments become radicalized when he begins blaming societal factor for women's dating choices. These sentiments are familiar from male supremacist circles of the online right, particularly the incel (*involuntary celibate*) communities (Ging 2019). As Manne (2020) points out, on surface level these resentments appear to stem from male sexual frustration. Yet they also contain deeper layers of entitlement: desire for not only sex but rather admiration from women (15–32). Similarly, the Racist Lorry Driver bemoans how women, "don't care if you're a good guy. They're superficial creatures" (ID 849–185). This invokes a recognizable online trope of a "Nice Guy" who initially acts "nice," but then turns hostile when his advances are rejected. The notion that women take economic advantage of more stable "nice guys" while sexually preferring "bad guys" is a common one across various parts of the so-called manosphere—a slew of online male supremacist factions united by a belief that contemporary society favors women over men (Ging 2019). In *Disco Elysium*, this worldview can also be expressed by a misogynist Harry when given the option to rant about how women like to "ride the cockcarousel" before settling in with a provider (ID 28–1182).

Male supremacist online communities often also include White supremacism, manifesting in the demonization of interracial couples (Manne 2020, 22–23). This intertwinement of misogyny and racism is on display throughout *Disco Elysium*. For instance, a fascist Harry who is not tough enough can have his sexual prowess mocked by Endurance: "What's that? Can't hear yourself over the moans of your wömen in the hands of foreigners who play them like instruments" (ID 10–446). The humiliating description borders on kinky fantasy. While the trope of foreigners "stealing" women from the native population is a common one in much of populist right, the kinkiness of the depiction indicates toward the more contemporary rise of "cuck" as a favored insult among the "Alt Right" around 2016. Originally aimed at conservatives who were seen too weak on their principles, cuck quickly became a favored far-right insult to attack the masculinity of their ideological enemies. On top of the sexual connotations of cuckoldry, the word carries a racial undertone, as in the field of pornography, cuckold porn often includes the racial dynamic of a White man watching his wife have sex with a Black man (Kolehmainen 2017). The dynamic both demonizes foreigners, admonishes (White) women for their lack of (racial) loyalty and creates victimhood for the White men who present themselves as the underdogs in the scenario.

Outside the domain of sexual politics, the male supremacist belief system is shown in crisis, for example, in the interactions between a fascist Harry and Joyce Messier, the female representative of the Wild Pines Group conglomerate who control shipping and logistics—and therefore wield considerable political power in the Martinaise harbor district. When Harry is given the option to beg Messier for a handout, the option aligned with fascism points out how shameful it would be for a *man* to ask a *woman* for money (ID 631–621, 631–361). Such an action would upset the seemingly natural gender hierarchies and go against the male supremacist value system which sees man's economic subservience to a woman as emasculation (Bates 2021, 120–21). The more Harry gets invested with fascism, the more these ideas start to influence even his ordinary observations. For instance, when going through the buttons of a tenement building door phone, merely buzzing the one titled Andro-Orlando's Hair Saloon provokes an outburst from Half Light: "Just seeing the words 'Andro-Orlando' gets your hackles up. It's [*sic*] very existence is a *threat* to your masculinity, to say nothing of your hair" (ID 213–459). The game highlights the fragility of fascist masculinity, threatened by the mere existence of non-traditional masculinities or powerful women.

The ideological simulation of the game also highlights the justifications that fascism gives to mask its bigotries. Misogynists often do not see themselves as being so, instead producing internal justifications for why their beliefs are correct. This dynamic is well illustrated by the ending of Harry's induction into fascism:

*HDB*: "I will keep my vöws ... for the glory of the Revacholian nation." (ID 531–6)
*Endurance*: "For the nation ... smart. Best not to mention *the wömen* too often. That's why you're the head and I am the stomach." (ID 531–6)
*HDB*: "No, fascism is about industry and politics and nationhood, not wömen. I'm absolutely okay with women." (ID 531–14)

*Endurance*: "Of course you are, bröther. Of course. (A wink-shaped growl sounds from your ass.)" (ID 531–45)

Therefore, Harry can muster a litany of justifications for what he thinks fascism should *really* be about. Endurance sees this as a tactic to mask the ideology in the public sphere and dismisses Harry's objections with a coy wink accompanied by a bowel movement. The same principle is shown earlier, when Harry may object to the term "fascism," proposing instead the euphemism "traditionalism" (ID 531–12). This portrays another important facet of modern right-wing politics: the Doublespeak.

## 11.2 The döublespeak and fascist symbölism

*Disco Elysium* presents coded communication and ideological masks as fundamental to the logic of fascism. There is often a marked difference between what the adherents of the radical right *believe* and what they say out loud. Communication uses coded language and symbols recognizable only by those who either share the ideology or are targeted by their political rhetoric (Jackson and Feldman 2015; Åkerlund 2021). The elements of doublespeak range from dog whistles, which use seemingly innocuous language that is only recognized as ideologically charged by those with investment, to symbols with no inherent ideological meaning beyond their adoption by right-wing movements. The most explicit real-world example of the latter is the evolution of the OK hand sign into a right-wing dog whistle, started first as a joke by users of the message board 4chan. It was an explicit attempt to "troll" liberals by turning the gesture into right-wing symbol. Since then, it has become reality through its use by, among others, the male supremacist right-wing group the Proud Boys in the United States and the Christchurch shooter in New Zealand (Feuerherd 2019; Neiwert 2018). In Estonia, the OK sign was displayed by the leader of the far-right EKRE party at their swearing in ceremony in 2019 ("Estonia's Far-Right Ministers Face Rocky Start with First Resignation" 2019).

The spread of symbols such as this shows the transnational virality of right-wing extremism and the influence of U.S. politics on national expressions. *Disco Elysium*'s portrayal of fascism is an example of this, being influenced both by European and U.S. centric manifestations of right-wing ideology, often shaped in online milieus. Although, as other chapters in this volume demonstrate, the game's sensibility is heavily influenced by the Estonian Post-Soviet cultural moment, it is also in many ways deeply transnational. Its writing appears heavily tuned to the online politics in the post-2016 era, demonstrated concretely when the developers approached the hosts of the U.S. leftist podcast *Chapo Trap House* for voice acting (McCarthy 2019).

The working of doublespeak becomes often revealed through Harry's police partner, Kim Kitsuragi. Coded in the milieu of the game as non-White, he is habitually quicker than the main character in picking up racist dog whistles, which, according to Ian Haney López (2014), always operate on two levels: "inaudible and easily denied in one range, yet stimulating strong reactions in another" (3). A clear example of this is Harry's first interaction with the Racist Lorry Driver. His opening greeting, "Welcome to Revachol," is explicitly targeted at Kim Kitsuragi if he is present (ID 320–576). If Kim is missing, a successful Empathy check notifies Harry that "usually he says it with derision, but to you he seems to say it as an actual greeting" (ID 320–489). The phrase receives different meaning based on its target and tone. Kim is not blind to this, launching into an uncharacteristically passionate rant for the often collected and professional detective:

> Don't you "Welcome to Revachol" me ... My grandfather came here from a three-thousand-year-old racist-isolationist culture, while your ancestors came to this island a mere three hundred years ago... . Every school of thought and government has failed in this city—but I love it nonetheless. It belongs to me as much as it belongs to you... . It's men like you who keep Revachol divided, making it that much harder for everyone to climb out of this post-war limbo.
>
> (ID 320–637, 320–47, 320–619)

Kim recognizes the implication of racial belonging: the White Lorry Driver assumes himself to be the true Revacholian in a superior position to welcome Kim Kitsuragi's racial "Other." Kim turns the tables by noting how his Revacholian lineage likely out-extends the racist's. He moves on to propose a more pluralist conception of nationhood, which finds national pride not in racial belonging but through a subscription to the political ideal of Revachol as an ideological laboratory. This further shows the transnational influences in the game's world-building, as, for example, U.S. Black Americans have sought to build their own paths toward patriotism through social critique that pushes the country to meet its unfulfilled foundational ideals (see, for example, Johnson 2018, 1974–75).

Faced with Kim's assault, the Lorry Driver attempts a verbal retreat, claiming that the phrase was just "a lorry driver thing" (ID 320–619). Kim is unphased by the defense: "I know exactly what you meant. You think my *kind* doesn't belong here. That I should *watch myself* and *behave*" (ID 320–341). Thus, the phrase is a sterling example of a racist dog whistle: it is not immediately offensive, requiring a level of cultural competency to decode, and although the Lorry Driver uses it with explicit intention, it is innocuous enough for feigned innocence.

This dynamic also shows with Gary, the cryptofascist. He is a conspiracy theorist who reveres authority, venerating Harry's position in the semi-official police force of the city. He bemoans the "degenerates" (ID 533–307) inhabiting the coastal areas, replicating a common neo-Nazi terminology. As Annie Kelly (2017) notes, "degeneracy" conceptually stems from eugenicist roots before rising as a word of wider social and cultural critique in Nazi Germany. In more recent years, it has risen in the online right to "signal progressivism and modernity as an assault on supposed white past" (72–73).

An explicit fascist code-word for Gary is his pronunciation of "Revachol" with a hard K (ID 533–687). When questioned, he responds: "I like to pronounce it the *hard* way. The old way. The Vespertine way" (ID 533–730). He then winks at Harry, "trying to relay some hidden message. Inviting you to mispronounce it too perhaps" (ID 533–604). The player can surmise that it is a "secret rite. A very fringe-nationalist handshake, probably" (ID 533–284). Therefore, simple difference in pronunciation can be coded fascist communication. However, Endurance interjects: "Garbage. You're a *true* patriot and you know how it's said. The Suresne way. The *fine* way. With an elegant shh ..." (ID 533–688). Thus, the game highlights disunion between fascist factions, torn even across trivial lines such as pronunciation.

As an element of doublespeak, Gary alters his speaking register based on Kim's presence. Talking about pseudohistorical accounts of self-mutilation, Gary refers to "certain ancient Semenese tribes" (ID 851–349) with Kim present, while talking about "some old kipt tribes" (ID 851–63) with just Harry. The more "correct" ethnic descriptor "Semenese" is replaced by a racist pejorative "kipt," but beyond, the whole vocabulary shifts from "ancient" to "old" and "certain" to "some." The custom is described as "really disturbing" (ID 851–204) if Kim is present and "really sick" (ID 851–244) if not. Thus, Gary attempts to sound more refined when speaking in front of someone he considers "Other" but lets loose when speaking to just Harry—someone he may see as an ideological ally.

Jean-Luc Measurehead provides a different angle to doublespeak. Unlike Gary and the Lorry Driver, who use coded language to *hide* their ideology, Measurehead is open about his beliefs. Instead, coded language is used in a (mocked) attempt to elevate his ideology by coaxing basic descriptions in pseudoscientific language. For instance, when talking about his muscled frame, Measurehead speaks of "MORPHOPHYSIOLOGY" (ID 381–95). He calls himself the "RACIAL PINNACLE" (ID 381–878) who towers over the "OCCIDENTAL HABLOGROUP B4," or the "HAM SANDWICH RACE" as he calls Harry's ethnicity (ID 381–949). Yet much like with the excessive umlauts, Measurehead's pseudoscientific jargon accomplished the opposite effect of what he might intend. Authority skill mockingly calls Measurehead "the sage" (ID 381–593) if the player calls out his pseudoscientific claims of racial biology (ID 381–286). When delving into the difference between Semenese and Areopagite races, the game's prompt forward says "Continue receiving wisdom" (ID 381–29). Authoritative descriptors like "sage" and "wisdom" when combined with Measurehead's hyper-specific jargon turn it comedic. He produces ludicrous justifications for where a race might land in his classification system, for instance saying that "the Mesque," "HAVE A *GLANDULAR PROBLEM* ... OVERPRODUCTION OF *SEBUM*. SEBUM IS LEAKING INTO THEIR BRAINS, MAKING THEM LISTEN TO *EL MARIACHI* MUSIC AND EAT TOXIC MINCED MEAT BASED

FOOD" (ID 381–524, 381–71). Cultural mores are explained biologically and seen as indicative of racial value. At times, Measurehead appears even trapped by his ideology, unable to experience the world without molding it to fit his system of classification.

Yet in a way, Measurehead contests the fabric of racial supremacy held by other fascists. He appears superior, though in a comical fashion. All his dialogue is written capitals to emphasize his projected power. Both Gary and the Racist Lorry Driver are ridiculed for the mismatch between their physical form and their belief in their racial supremacy. Harry can call this out by stating to the Racist Lorry Driver that "Yes, I can really tell you're a prime example of superior design" (ID 346–971). The physical instrument skill may reinforce the point: "If this guy's all the *Occidentals* have, well ... let's just say he's not exactly ripped" (ID 346–540). Meanwhile, Measurehead is described as a "behemoth." He stands guard at the gates leading to the docks and while it is entirely possible to best him in physical combat, it is very difficult. Measurehead is the living embodiment of the fears of the White racists. At the docks, he is surrounded by "Measurehead's babes" who are constantly lavishing him with praise and regurgitating his ideology. "Look at him—he's craniometric perfection" (ID 381–487), one of them notes in admiration. He even contests the classic domain of racial supremacist politics: Whiteness. He calls Kojkos and Vacholiers (who the player character would call White, according to Visual Calculus) "mud colored" (ID 381–753, 381–392). He explains:

> "TO AN UNTRAINED EYE THE KOJKO APPEAR WHITE AND PINKISH. LIKE A HAM SANDWICH. BUT LOOK INTO THEIR EYES AND YOU WILL SEE ..." He squints, full of sage wisdom: "THEY ARE OF AN INDISTINCT, MUDDY COLOUR. AND SO IS THEIR SKIN: UNHEALTHY, SWEATY AND ASHEN ... PINKNESS IS A RACIAL QUALITY THAT HAS TO BE EARNED THROUGH CENTURIES OF ADVANCED BALLISTIC WARFARE AND CULTURAL DOMINATION THAT THE GRAAD PEOPLE HAVE UNDERGONE FOR DRINKING AL GUL AND SMOKING THE DEGENERATE *TABAC* HERB ... AND FOR EATING *POTATO* ... THE KOJKO—THE COUNTLESS MICRONATIONALITIES OF GRAAD—ARE ALL INEXPLICABLY OBSESSED WITH *POTAAT*. THE ONLY THING THEY LIKE MORE IS DIVIDING INTO MICROSCOPIC ETHNOSTATES."
>
> (ID 381–797, 381–794, 381–754)

Again, Measurehead sees cultural habits like eating potatoes, drinking alcohol or smoking tobacco as signs of racial decline, linked naturalistically to political formations. Meanwhile, Whiteness is seen as a victory state that must be earned through warfare.

Cultural and racial warfare lies at the heart of Measurehead's ideology. Even mundane actions are given significance as moments of triumph or loss. For instance, if Harry enlists Measurehead's help to get the dead body down from the tree, Measurehead proclaims: "STAND DOWN AND CONGRATULATE YOURSELF. YOU HAVE SIDED WITH RACE VICTORY TODAY" (ID 381–362). Through metaphors of warfare, Measurehead transforms menial tasks and his underling position as the muscle working under the leadership of Dockworker's Union into demonstrations of racial superiority. This brings me to the final point of the chapter, which is how fascism is portrayed as an ideology of constant warfare and, despite Measurehead's attestations, an ideology of losers.

## 11.3 The lösers of the cültural wärfare

Among the famous observations Umberto Eco (1995) makes in his essay on "Ur-Fascism" is that for fascism, "there is no struggle for life, but, rather, life is lived for struggle ... *life is permanent warfare*" (7). Further, Eco notes:

> The followers must feel humiliated by the ostentatious wealth and force of their enemies... . However, the followers must be convinced that they can overwhelm the enemies. Thus, by a continuous shifting of rhetorical focus, the enemies are at the same time too strong and too weak.
>
> (7).

This is hard-wired into the logic of fascism in *Disco Elysium*. Each fascist character comes with a conception of their cultural enemies, to whom they both feel superior but yet are losing.

The Racist Lorry Driver describes this:

> Open your eyes. Haven't you noticed something different lately? An unfortunate downturn, maybe? When members of the superior race cease to believe in their innate superiority, they stop competing for resources... . The problem? The damn kipts are showing a real good game lately! Same with the mesquitos. And all the other intruder species out there, breeding like rabbits. They're on the precipice of cultural victory... . It's what the kipts of Boogie Street are going for—right under our noses. And the others too, on the radio. Heard any *chansons* lately? Heard any *mottettos* or *lieder*? No. Dominating culture is how they plan to win.
>
> (ID 346–320, 346–444, 346–505)

As noted prior, fascism is built on a sense of crisis. Likewise, the fascist characters feel like they are involved in constant a battle over culture. This resonates with real-world right-wing politics where over the last few decades, the idea of a "culture war" has become instrumental (Hartman 2015; Furedi 2017). In *Disco Elysium*, these culture wars concern values, but also culture more generally, as all the fascist NPCs give great deal of meaning to popular culture. For Measurehead, musical and culinary culture are signs of decline. For the Lorry Driver, "chansons," "mottettos," and "lieder" vanishing from the airwaves symbolize demographic shifts. The language bears similarity to the real-world Great Replacement theory—a far-right conspiratorial vision suggesting that there is an orchestrated effort to demographically replace White Europeans with people of non-European origin (Ekman 2022). In Lorry Driver's quote, this sentiment is reinforced by dehumanizing language of "intruder species" who are "breeding like rabbits." Gary proposes another version of this theory: that immigrants from the technologically advanced nation of Seol are infiltrating the power structures of Revachol. On two separate occasions Gary mentions how Seolite immigrants are playing the violin and cello, suggesting that these two "high-brow" instruments carry a particular symbolic function (ID 533–406, 533–181, 533–131).

The character that forges the connection between fascism and warfare most explicitly is René Arnoux. He is a former royalist soldier who fought against the communist revolution decades prior and still in his old age dons the elaborate uniform of the Suzerainty of Revachol. Arnoux is haunted by the humiliation of the monarchy. Not only did they lose against the "communards," but they also had to be saved by the Coalition, leading to a persisting occupation: "Instead, all that is just, holy, and beautiful in the world was wiped away and now it's neon signs with toothpaste ads everywhere. Foreign influence peddling garbage and stupid music on the radio" (ID 275–118). Again, Arnoux uses the symbolism of popular culture to drive the point.

Arnoux's bitterness is fueled by the failure of the royalty he venerates. The Suzerainty was not at the peak of its power but in decline. King Guillaume "Le Lion" fled the city at the time of the Antecentennial Revolution to become a venture capitalist. He was followed to the throne by King Frissel whose attempts at quelling the revolution proved disastrous, with more emphasis on the gaudiness of uniforms than military tactics. Even Arnoux holds little affinity for King Frissel, calling him a "damn clown" (ID 275–34). Arnoux appears in denial about the circumstances of King Guillaume's abdication, pretending he was exiled by the communards while calling contrary information propaganda (ID 275–8, 275–5).

Compared to the other, more modern fascist characters, Arnoux as a kingsman alludes to the conservative ideologies that emerged out of the French Revolution, thus making explicit the link between traditionalism and fascism. In Corey Robin's (2018) reading, even Edmund Burke showed unease with his valorization of the Old Regime. Robin posits that it is common for reactionary ideologies to simultaneously venerate a past regime while also condemning it. For Arnoux as well, the Suzerainty he desires is a fiction of history, not a feature of his lived past. He rues the military tactics of his Suzerainty, thinking them insufficient in their forcefulness and brazenness: "Should've fought dirty. Like they did with their suicide sex cult propaganda and *mad anarchist women* strapped to

shrapnel bombs. We didn't though. And we lacked *calibre*. God bless him, but the suzerain's cannons simply weren't big enough" (ID 275–59). He links the Suzerainty's tactical hesitance to failure in masculinity and sexual vigor: the comment on the size of suzerain's cannons is more a phallic allusion than a reference to firepower. Simultaneously, Arnoux takes eerie pride in the military failure: "You were still in daddy's balls when it happened. When *we* took our last stand against the filth and rode the cavalry straight into gunfire" (ID 275–19).

This is what the game notes lies at the heart of fascism's veneration of warfare: the struggle is ultimately futile. The metaphors only serve to elevate fascists as would-be heroes wrapped in an existential struggle they cannot win—"Defenders of the Evening Lands" (ID 346–239), as Harry and the Racist Lorry Driver are dubbed. Throughout Harry's induction to fascism, his inner voices call him Kingsman who needs to harden himself in service of Revachol:

> Remember: Kingsmen are not born, they are made. And the only thing that can unmake us is that which drove us to rise above in the first place. We keep that thing locked in the deepest cellars of our mind. So deep we forget what it is... . We keep it buried like a horrible secret. We feed it through the cracks in the floorboards out of a sickening sense of nostalgia. Just enough to keep it alive. And yet it still comes to us in moments of weakness, unbidden, a source of shame and panic... . A day will come when you need to take a shotgun to that cellar, shoot whatever is down there in the head, and walk away, never looking back... . Your heart can belong to Revachol or it can belong to darkness. As long as it's torn between them it's broken and useless.
>
> (ID 10–253, 10–161, 10–468, 10–368)

To be a fascist is to have a dark secret, a source of shame, a motivating, denied love, but rather than addressing it, one has to lock it away, suppress it under the ideology. Facing it in a healthy way is the only thing that could sway a fascist off their path.

For the Racist Lorry Driver, his resentment comes from a lack of admiration by women. A logical Harry may note that his culture war explanations for women's affections are mere justifications to remove his own culpability—to convince himself that there is something wrong with the world and not in his own conduct and expectations (ID 849–165). For René Arnoux, it might initially appear that his resentment stems from having "lost" his fiancé to his best friend/rival Gaston (ID 587–52, 587–133, 587–305). However, deeper investigation reveals that Arnoux's affectations might be more toward Gaston instead, René having suppressed his bisexuality for its incompatibility with his values—"a love aborted and smothered, stamped beneath his brilliant boot heel" (ID 848–107).

For Measurehead, the tragedy is three-fold. First, though he espouses the racial/cultural supremacy of the Semenese people, he is born and raised in Revachol with no firsthand knowledge of his venerated country. Though he claims connection to his homeland through "GENETIC DREAMS" (ID 381–425), when pressed he must admit that his exposure to his culture comes only through the radio (ID 381–624). This a point of humiliation for him that he does not like questioned "in front of the women" (ID 381–688). Second, he views mixed-race offspring as abhorrent "chimeras," yet he has genuine affections for one of his "babes," Katya, who is a Kojko and thus racial underclass in Measurehead's system of classification. "THE HEART THAT PUMPS THE HAEMOGLOBIN IS MYSTERIOUS, AND SO IS ITS DARK WILL," Measurehead says when pushed on the point (ID 381–224). This is the trap of his ideology, as he is unable to pursue the meaningful relationship he desires out of ideological dogma. Third is his relationship with his abusive father, which he has rationalized as love:

> HE REALISED THAT IF THE TENDER TOUCH OF MY MOTHER WASN'T OPPOSED I WOULD TURN INTO A ... COMPLETE *PUSSY*... . SO HE DID WHAT A MAN MUST. HE BECAME A *COUNTERWEIGHT*. OF IRON. THROUGH SCARCITY, ASCESIS, DISCIPLINE, AND RESPECTFUL DISTANCE EVERY FATHER SHOULD HAVE FOR HIS SON.
>
> (ID 850–57, 850–278, 850–56)

Measurehead turns his father's abuse into a service he undertook to balance out his mother's nurture. From this festering trauma stems his worldview where hardness, discipline and victory are the only meaningful values.

## 11.4 Cönclusion: tö fight tïme itself

The final political vision quest of fascism in *Disco Elysium* is "To Turn Back the Wheels of Time." The final opponent of fascism is time itself, marking the ultimate folly of the ideology. Interestingly, the point is made best by Measurehead: "THE PAST IS MADE OF STATIC IMAGES, DISTORTED MEMORIES, DEMENTED NOSTALGIA. THIS, THE PRESENT—WITH ALL ITS POSSIBILITIES, INNUMERABLE HITS AND MISSES—IS FAR SUPERIOR. IT IS A *LIVING* ORGANISM" (ID 850–428). Measurehead admits that past is a figment, and especially so for the fascists who venerate it. This is the truth behind any reactionary movement in general: the Mythic Past they worship rarely if ever existed. The complexities that they condemn in the modern world were there in the past; they simply choose to not acknowledge them. Yet the present is contaminated by the darkness in the cellar, so instead of facing it, they turn to their ideology. In a rare moment of lucidity Measurehead urges Harry to look forward: "REINVENT YOURSELF FROM DEFEAT" (ID 850–256).

Thus, fascism is wallowing in defeat. It is about not letting go and projecting blame to avoid having engage in introspection. Fascism is about stubborn refusal to change and the demand that the world changes (or stops changing) instead. The ending of the political vision quest does not, of course, lead Harry to turn back time, but neither does it end in a grand self-realization. Rather, it ends in an affirmation of the chosen course. Endurance pushes Harry to yell: "YOU ARE THE NOBLE SUFFERER" (ID 10–98).

For there is no victory for fascism. Just suffering. To the end.

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# 12 Decomposing the body politic

## Sick and disabled resistance in *Disco Elysium*

*Vic Castro*

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## Introduction

> "I can't believe this shit ..." He shakes his head, looking like he really is having trouble believing this *shit*.
>
> —Jean Vicquemare, *Disco Elysium*.[1]

Sitting by the bar of a run-down hostel, disguised with a blond wig and dark sunglasses, police officer Jean Vicquemare forcefully utters his disbelief as *Disco Elysium*'s game text, tongue in cheek, hammers in the speechlessness he finds himself in. He is not shocked, astounded, flabbergasted, stupefied, thunderstruck, open-mouthed, aghast or gobsmacked; nor any of these words that ultimately serve to tame and package the freakishness. Vicquemare is so much beyond words that his emotional-intellectual state may only be approached by a plain, recursive and substantially empty description.

Through its mix of dry humor and emotional crudeness, *Disco Elysium* is good at making the player stare in bewilderment, as if watching a freak show. Whether through the distorted body parts that fill the Thought Cabinet's artworks, the protagonist's grotesque appearance and behavior, or the human decay of Martinaise, the game puts forward disabled bodies and minds for the player's entertainment—but also for political critique.

Disabled people in 19th-century freak shows, and their contemporary equivalents on telethon programs, are often seen with good reason as victims of a voyeuristic and Otherizing gaze (Smit 2003). But freak shows cannot be simply reduced to the exploitation of disabled people. Many performers, by flaunting their own disabilities, would consciously destabilize the certainties of abled spectators about how embodied humans and societies may function (Durbach 2009). Contrary to first impressions, power is not necessarily on the side of spectators.

The dynamic at play is what disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls *staring*. It is what happens with Vicquemare as he stands helpless in front of the

erratic protagonist.

> The starer is a properly attentive spectator befuddled, halted in mid-glance, mobility throttled, processing checked, network run amok ... [they] manifest a failure of knowing ... The world, not the individual, is in control. Thus staring is the opposite of paying attention because the starer is not master of the encounter.
>
> (Garland-Thomson 2006, 21–23)

This chapter explores how sick and disabled body-minds are presented in *Disco Elysium*, and how this relates to the game's critique of capitalism and liberal modernity. The first section deepens the concept of staring, philosophically and critically, through the game's encounter with Cuno's father. The next part presents several sick and disabled characters in the game, and unfolds how their messy body-minds are laden with politics. The final section raises the question of sick and disabled body politics through the embodiments of Dolores Dei, La Revacholière and the RCM.

## 12.1 Staring at the ex-human: Cuno's father

The neighborhood in which *Disco Elysium* takes place, Martinaise, is a place of desolation. It is not simply a part of a larger metropolis, Revachol, that has been neglected by the governing coalition after the end of the war. "The rest of the city got cleaned up, but Martinaise they keep as a *monument*," says royalist veteran René Arnoux. There is something deliberate in keeping Martinaise the way it is. It is a place to keep the traumatic memory of the Communist revolution and its brutal international repression (Duhé, this volume). It is also what anthropologist João Biehl would call a "zone of social abandonment," after a phenomenon he saw emerging across major Brazilian cities through the 1990s and 2000s.

Biehl describes zones of social abandonment as hosting, "in inhuman conditions," people such as "the mentally ill and homeless, AIDS patients, the unproductive young, and old bodies." State, welfare and medical institutions appear absent from these zones. But they are tacitly present as they "*direct* the unwanted to the zones, where these individuals are sure to become unknowables" (Biehl 2013, 4). In such zones, people become "ex-humans," in a "bureaucratically and relationally sanctioned register of social death" where "the human, the mental, and the chemical are complicit" (2013, 20). The "chemical" here stands for pharmaceutics: ex-humanity is inseparable from physical and mental illness, whether real or purported.

The production of ex-humans cannot be reduced to a mere "dehumanization," however. First because it is a more specific phenomenon that relies on a complex entanglement between family, law enforcement, social welfare, the medical-pharmaceutical system and capitalism itself. Second because "dehumanization"

tends to presuppose intrinsic qualities attached to the "human," as well as a normative and moral centrality of the "human" that this chapter takes issue with.

This centrality of the "human" has been a cornerstone of modern Western thought from the 16th century onward, cementing itself with the Enlightenment. It has fallen under considerable critique in the humanities [*sic!*] over the past few decades, as scholars have raised how liberal humanism is entangled with capitalist exploitation, environmental destruction, and various oppressive and exclusionary structures (Braidotti 2019). *Disco Elysium* itself is scathingly critical of humanism through its in-game incarnation of moralism, discussed abundantly in the rest of this volume.

The characters in Martinaise retain their normative humanity to varying extents. Some, like the Communist students, attend university elsewhere in Revachol and appear reasonably integrated in mainstream society, despite their odd beliefs about the power of Communist thought upon vegetables. At the other end of the scale, one might find a homeless man known as Don't Call Abigail, after the only sentence he manages to groan when not passed out from various substances. The most detailed and archetypal example of ex-humanity that *Disco Elysium* presents is however, arguably, Cuno's father:

*A PILE OF CLOTHES*: Your hand touches a greasy duvet, covered in cigarette burns and ketchup stains. You hear a growl. There is something *alive* underneath it. *[Pull the blanket.]* You see a 60-year-old fat red-headed man passed out from large amounts of alcohol. And god knows what else. The smell of shit rises from his mouth.

*YOU*: "Kim, is this thing even *alive*?"

*KIM KITSURAGI*: "I'm afraid it is. Look, it *moves*." He points to a fleshy lump sticking out from the other end of the blanket. The limb seems to be twitching from time to time.

*PERCEPTION (SIGHT)*: And look, the other foot is camouflaged by a striped sock bearing the name MAXTOR on the sole. Three toes are poking out of a hole.

*ENCYCLOPEDIA*: Maxtor is a gas company. He's wearing free socks from a gas company. They probably came with the bills.

The two police officers call Cuno's father a "thing," an "it." One may argue that this is a dehumanizing move that denies the fact that he is *still a human being*. This is a fair argument that would be endorsed in liberal thought. However, there are significant problems regarding what the category of "human being" includes and excludes. These include acutely political questions such as when human embryo start qualifying as "human beings," and when a human body is "dead enough" to qualify as dead (Lock 2002). Nonhuman living beings also tend to be taken out of the picture (Taylor 2017). Naturalizing the "human" as a self-evident biological category not only runs into such predicaments but also has a violent legacy in which racialized peoples (among other "undesirables") are considered not fully human (Chen 2012).

Critical disability scholars and activists have coined the concept of *ableism*, a structural condition that produces a "perfected naturalised humanity" based on particular abilities of the body and mind, co-constitutively opposed to "the aberrant, the unthinkable, quasi-human hybrid and therefore non-human" disabled embodiments (Campbell 2009, 6). The aforementioned excerpt from *Disco Elysium* depicts Cuno's father, not as the kind of self-contained human envisioned in ableism, but as something quite opposite: a messy assemblage of biological matter, chemicals, everyday objects, and—yes—capitalism. Such an assemblage elicits the kind of staring described in the introduction. It does so in three ways, each of them important to how ex-human assemblages are characterized.

The first relates to the denaturalization of body parts. Most people in their daily lives see a foot as a foot, a body part with various expected uses and social meanings. They do not see it as a construct of bone, muscle, skin, nerves and germs (or perhaps only the germs enter the picture). This is so unless the foot in question deviates from norms of a "proper" foot by being misshaped, swollen, emaciated, dirty or damaged. Then people *stare* at it, in Garland-Thomson's (2006) sense. Because it does not look enough like their idea of a "foot," they have to go back to the fact that it is also a "fleshy lump."

This phenomenon is akin to what science and technology studies (STS) call *black-boxing*. The messy inner workings of a technology are forgotten about as long as the technology keeps working *as it should*. When it fails to do so, the black box "opens up" and the constituent parts emerge in all their unruliness: the cogs that do not spin, the short-circuited electronics, the bugged software features. Following this logic, the foot is a foot (and not a complex biological assemblage) until it stops working, or looking, the way it should.

Comparing a human body to a technological device might sound questionable. Machine-like understandings of the body in Western thought have been closely related to scientific racism and sexism, among other unpalatable ideologies (Schiebinger 2004). However, these views of bodies as rigid and essentialized machines are unfair not only to bodies but also to how machines work. While technological determinism in the mid-20th century still viewed machines as implacable, practically moved by a soul of their own (Winner 1978), these perspectives were later displaced by STS.

Bruno Latour did much to argue that rather than "smooth, cold, profitable, efficient, inhuman, irreversible, autonomous" (1996, 174), technologies are messy and fragile associations of human and nonhuman actors, which need to be nurtured and maintained in order to function. He tellingly compared technologies to Frankenstein's monster, a disabled figure whose abandonment by his human creator turns him mad. But Latour did not really extend his statement to bodies. This was done by Annemarie Mol (2002), who picked up his work to understand bodies as reenacted and remade by practices, food and medical technologies.

A pivotal concept in Mol's work is that of *care* (2008). Just like technologies for Latour, bodies for Mol need to be tinkered with, and rely on many other humans, nonhumans and institutions to live. Care is also an ethical imperative, and the

absence of proper care—the abandonment of a body from what sustains it—is *neglect*. But this dichotomy is a bit simple. This resonates with Biehl's ethnography of zones of social abandonment. People become ex-humans, not (only) because they are neglected by mainstream society but (rather) because their ex-humanity is actively *cared for*.

Cuno's father, after all, has socks that the policemen stare at. The socks have been given to him by the gas company with the bills. He is not completely cut off from society. On the contrary, he is still a cog in a capitalist system. Ex-humanity is not a matter of "simply fall[ing] through the cracks of these various domestic and public systems" (Biehl 2013, 14). Capitalism is more than just the main culprit for his descent into drugs, violence and social/physical decomposition. It also *maintains* him there in cruelly ironic ways, such as by giving him free socks to cope with freezing March temperatures when he inevitably fails to pay the bills for gas heating.

After black-boxing and care, a third aspect of ex-human assemblages may be *orientation*, a term here borrowed loosely from queer feminist Sara Ahmed (2006). One phrase describing Cuno's father is "[t]he smell of shit rises from his mouth." This is disorientated, disorientating and a good example of a staring moment. As a body part, the "mouth" is not the proper place for "shit." The mouth is *for* tasteful food, possibly eaten in public while socializing, while the anus is *for* shit, expelled in private and given away as soon as possible to the sewers (a zone of cultivated abandonment for formerly human matter).

Mixing up these two body parts, and what they are *for*, is disorientating. *Perverted*, in the etymological sense of going the wrong way. It does not matter—or perhaps it does?—that food and shit are fundamentally the same matter, once the first has gotten through the machinery inside the black box and been charged with some of the bacteria that constitute 90% of the genetic material in a "human" (Mol 2021; Haraway 2013). Oral contact with feces is repulsive to most, except, interestingly, to some stigmatized sexual minorities.

There is a "straightness"—as in the opposite of queerness—in assigning that certain things are *for* other things. But disorientation does not have to be liberatory. It can equally be violent. The duvet that covers Cuno's father strikes the eye, is not black-boxed, elicits staring, because there are many things to it that a duvet *is not for*. Cigarette burns and ketchup stains are among them. This reminds of what Elaine Scarry (1987) remarked in more extreme situations. For her, one of the ways in which torture succeeds in destroying a human body, and mind, is by repurposing harmless everyday objects—chairs or bathtubs—and combining them with body parts in way that they *were not for*.

*Disco Elysium* denounces the violence at play in the making of ex-humanity. But its depiction of Martinaise also celebrates the space between the human and the ex-human as one that can precisely challenge the capitalist violence inflicted by the "human." This is not to say that the burden of resisting capitalism must primarily fall on sick and disabled people. Rather, the game shows how sickness and disability can be sites of resistance, as developed later.

## 12.2 Disability, disease and struggle

The most obvious disabled character in an average *Disco Elysium* playthrough is Lena, the cryptozoologist's wife. She sits in a wheelchair near the bar of the motel where Harry wakes up for the first time and is one of the first characters he speaks to. In some ways, she is representative of a traditional form of disability activism, found for instance in Western Europe in the late 20th century, which centered on otherwise privileged people with spinal cord injuries (Shakespeare 2006). That view made a simple distinction between physical *impairments* and social *disability*, emphasizing that the issues faced by disabled people are due to a lack of accommodation by society.

Some of the first dialogue lines with Lena relate to her wheelchair and the social hurdles she faces. When asked by Harry if she could accompany him on his investigation, she replies that "Martinaise isn't the most wheelchair-accessible place, you see. I'd slow you down." If he tries to apologize for having been "rude" about the wheelchair, she matter-of-factedly says that "I'm used to people asking questions. I know they're thinking about it anyway."

Yet Lena departs in other ways from these old-school forms of disability activism. She is aware that her disability is more than the mere absence of accommodation or the quizzical gaze of others. Her gender—"an old woman in a wheelchair just doesn't look good holding a cigarette"—comes into the picture. So does the revaluation of disabled embodiments against the ableist norm, as Harry asks if he could "become a paraplegic too" and declares "I thought you were cool, with your wheels and all." But the most important entanglement of Lena's disability is of course with capitalism, as she compares herself, tongue-in-cheek, to a soldier in the neoliberal order and its dwindling welfare:

> *LENA, THE CRYPTOZOOLOGIST'S WIFE*: "I was injured in the line of duty... . I was a training and development manager at a rapidly expanding mail-order shoe company. You'd think it would be a safe job. But I had to be everywhere—and, well, once I happened to be under some faulty scaffolding. I was lucky. This was almost twenty years ago, and I was compensated exceptionally well. One can only dream of such pay-offs nowadays." She runs her hands over the chrome wheels of her chair.

Ableism, as seen earlier, is the structural condition that privileges a certain norm of the human based on body-mind abilities. The word "ableism" is often casually used to describe another structural condition, intertwined but different. *Disableism* refers broadly to the oppression of people deemed disabled. It often also "relates to the oppressive practices of contemporary society that threaten to exclude, eradicate and neutralise those individuals, bodies, minds and community practices that fail to fit the capitalist imperative" (Goodley 2014, xi).

Sick and disabled people—I try to use both adjectives, as the latter has historically neglected the former (Wendell 2001)—fail to produce as they should or to consume as they should. They fail to keep up with the accelerating times of neoliberalism,

instead lagging behind, without a "proper" future (Kafer 2013). At the same time, capitalism produces many of the very disabilities and illnesses its blames people for (McRuer 2018; Puar 2017). *Disco Elysium* sums it up with the name of one fleetingly-appearing character, the Very Hard to Exploit Handicapped Person.

When socioeconomic forces produce disabilities, it would be too easy to picture them as altering an originary, orderly "abled" body. The very idea of an "abled" body, at least as conceived in Western modernity, is actually a product of political liberalism and individualism that cemented itself in the Industrial Revolution, as human rights were reserved to those fitting some criteria for being "human" (Castro 2024). Sick and disabled bodies—like all bodies—are instead assemblages of organic matter, embodied minds, economic conditions and nonhuman actants, just like the deformities of Cuno's father in the previous section.

These heterogeneous elements can be seen in Bird's Nest Roy, the pawnshop owner. He hallucinates patterns of light due to Pyrholidon, a radiation sickness medicine with psychoactive effects. "Some poor leftists built a particle decay generator in hopes of bringing affordable electricity to underserved communities. It malfunctioned. Radioactive waste everywhere, probably some of it in *you*, too."[2] Roy was part of a volunteer clean-up force, which "wasted years in the river mud. Years of getting sick." As for the drug, "[h]e's taking it for mental and emotional, not physical pain these days."

Disabilities and illnesses, however, can be sites for resisting capitalism. For sure, this is not *necessarily* and always the case. The game gives counterexamples in Cuno's father, left to the mercy of a gas company, and a mentally ill woman nicknamed the Pigs, worn out by her socioeconomic situation to the point of believing herself to be a police officer. Lena, the cryptozoologist's wife, owes her wheelchair to social-democracy. Yet most of the time, *Disco Elysium* depicts illness and disability as giving one greater political agency.

The Washerwoman, a partially sighted elderly immigrant, is the only Martinaise inhabitant to seriously question the social-democratic union's plans for her village. "I might be half blind, but ... Rich men are always selling poor men promises they never plan to keep... . Then the poor get pushed out of their homes and the rich get a little richer." The Paledriver, whose brain was damaged by exposure to "heroic doses" of Pale radiation, experiences "thought insertion" and remembers historical events that she never witnessed—such as assassinating no less than Dolores Dei, the mother of humanism.

In contemporary psychiatry, thought insertion is considered one characteristic feature of schizophrenia. This illness has been abundantly discussed and (mis)appropriated in social theory, especially in relation to the modern condition (see Van Munster 2023).[3] In their *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* books, Deleuze and Guattari found the figure of the "schizophreniac" to be emblematic of capitalist life in its constant dissolution, both produced by capitalism and a place of resistance against capitalist machines (1972). It is thus interesting that features of schizophrenia, or of psychosis more generally, principally endow at least two pivotal characters in *Disco Elysium*: Dros the Deserter and Harry himself.

After the fall of the Commune, Dros became secluded on an island, detached from the world, delusional, paranoid, incoherent, with regular bouts of "catatonia." His bitter monologues about the death of the Communist dream and the rise of capitalism are the final high point of the game. His status as a relic from the past, a Communist remnant that refuses to give up, would likely not have been possible without his disease—itself possibly cultivated by the presence of the Insulindian Phasmid. Dros's schizophrenia, including his delusions that pictured Klaasje as a Communist figure, eventually leads him to shoot Lely dead. This reignites the class war that Dros had hopelessly wished for in decades.

In runs with enough of the Inland Empire skill, Harry routinely hears his necktie speak to him. With enough Shivers, he also hears the city's voice, including an extended episode in the church. In dialogue choices regardless of skill, he may also hold a variety of beliefs that may be labeled deluded, regarding the end of the world or his own grandeur. He may dress and act in egregiously socially inappropriate ways, often with hilarious results. Coalition Warship Archer may suggest to him that "you are experiencing an acute psychic break with reality." In some dialogue choices, Harry refers to his own "skillset" in apparent fourth-wall breaking. This can nevertheless be interpreted, not least by Kim Kitsuragi, as Harry hearing voices constantly and needing treatment.

Harry's illness pushes him to the end of the investigation and the final realization that "capitalism fucked me beyond all recognition." On the schizophrenia spectrum, Noid, one of the ravers around the church, holds his nickname from a paranoia that he turns into critique of the established political order. When asked whether he is mentally ill, he replies: "*Mental illness* is a term the powers use to homogenize people. I think I don't reach mental illness. I am merely politically ill. A suspicious element." Perhaps even more so than other illnesses and disabilities in the game, schizophrenia is posed as a wedge into capitalism.[4]

At a more abstract level, Harry's dis/ability furthermore hinges on the Character Sheet and its skill system.[5] There is no optimally abled version of Harry: each of the twenty-four skills becomes a liability if pushed too high, foreclosing possible dialogue options, and check failures may be more interesting than successes. Drugs and clothing elements temporarily alter Harry's skillset, and thus his abilities, which are an assemblage rather than innate characteristics of his body-mind. The Thought Cabinet also provides unpredictable and permanent skill alterations, which defy capitalist logics of optimization (see Gürses, this volume).

*Disco Elysium* is clear about the constructedness and absurdity of any abled ideal of the body. A magazine stand near the hostel showcases a "top 10 list" of "Most Able-Bodied Men," an obvious contradiction if abledness is supposed to be a default category. The argument is pushed further by Measurehead, the Black Supremacist colossus towering above the harbor gate. He boasts of "craniometric perfection," but adds, in his characteristic all caps: "I HAVE TAKEN THE TROUBLE TO PERMANENTLY DRAW A PHRENOLOGIC GRID ON MY SKULL AND FEATURES. THIS SHOULD DISPEL ANY DOUBT." The only way he can definitely assert his own able-bodiedness is, paradoxically, by altering his own body and tattooing measurements on it.

There is another hyperabled character in the game, but it is one who is simultaneously disabled. Lely, the mercenary, is a cyborg in Donna Haraway's sense—a progeny of patriarchal, racist, capitalist, technological imperialism that, in the project of upholding the nature-culture binaries upon which capitalism rests, confuses and troubles these very binaries (Haraway 1991). These abstract tensions become quite concrete in Lely's depiction.

Lely is a physiologically altered warrior who is paid to commit war crimes on behalf of corporations. He is a hypermasculine mass rapist whose name sounds feminine and flower-like. Lely's "*freakish* musculature"—and "freak" is an old slur against the disabled (Clare 2015)—is altered with scars and tattoos. He inscribed on his chest a constellation-like map of the atrocities he committed. He has a "*severe*" combat wound on his chin and mouth, which Klaasje finds attractive, and which "made him look like half his face was cracking away in some strange smile." When he dies, his high-tech combat boots end up fused to his body.

The assemblaged and dis/abled nature of Lely emerges most strikingly as he becomes the Hanged Man, a rotting corpse in the hostel's backyard who uncannily mirrors Harry's suicidal fantasies. Instead of being taken as a whole, Lely's body, much more than that of Cuno's father—as it is much more ex-human—becomes a machinery of flesh and traces to be minutely analyzed. The scene where Harry sticks his hand into the corpse's mouth and cranium could be expected to be highly disgusting. Instead, it is a journey through a remarkable organic world, beautiful enough to be reproduced at length here:

> *THE HANGED MAN*: The tongue moves freely in the cavity. The mucous of the mouth is slippery, delicate to touch. From the soft meat—teeth are budding; hard pearls of bone in the gums ... A vision of black and dark red death, pried open by your naked hands and studded with teeth... . And there, in the back of his mouth, above the bell of the uvula, right in the soft palate... . A tight tunnel of flesh opens up—tissue damage—wide enough for two fingers. As you push both in, you reach through his mouth, right into his brain stem. The basal ganglia feels clumpy—what entered here has torn apart his reptilian complex. Your fingers slide into the remains of his limbic system. There is no resistance. It's gelatinous. The slug-like structures are damaged too, the tearing extends deep into both hemispheres... . The cartilage gives in with a crack, like some fruit... . There's a tiny crack, a protrusion in the cranium, right in the back of his head. Your finger must be pointing straight at it. From the *inside*.

Disorientation strikes again, as the finger points to the hidden bullet from the *inside*, rather than the *outside*, of the body. The idea that bodies have a clean inside/outside distinction, so important to a manageable political order (Wilcox 2015), is gone. The final section of this chapter will delve into what disability and sickness can mean at a more abstract political level.

## 12.3 Loving the body politic

There is one last note-worthily hyperabled character in *Disco Elysium:* Dolores Dei. A saintly political leader who ushered liberal modernity in the Elysium world, she is the center of mainstream religious worship. While Lely's hyperabledness is simultaneously its own opposite, and while Measurehead pushes the concept of abledness to ridicule, Dolores Dei shines by her ominous absence. Or rather: she *haunts* the game (Derrida 2012). She is present through her absence from the opening lines of the game, when she is referred to an "ex-something," and even when her presence manifests itself in the "last dream" by the end of the game, her idealness is absent.

Long after her death, Dolores Dei still embodies the driving ideology behind the occupying Coalition. Tellingly, the Coalition itself is never seen by the player; its hovering airships are only visible in the menu screen, and even Coalition Warship Archer, in the eerie end of the Moralist questline, is described with words rather than appearing visually. Dolores Dei is also how Harry remembers his ex-partner, Dora Ingerlund, the memories of whose breakup constitute a second narrative arc throughout the game.

Dolores Dei is portrayed as the "mother of humanism" who single-handedly brings swaths of social and technoscientific innovations to the country she governs. Her reign is brutal, enough to justify calling her a "war criminal." In her church images, she is depicted as "insultingly beautiful," even though a "subtle terror is part of her iconography." Harry may exclaim that "she is not human." When she stands for Harry's ex-partner, she is a toxically idealized object of romantic love.

Liberal humanism, disability and the body politic relate at a philosophical level, which needs some background in political theory to understand. Back in the 17th century, Thomas Hobbes ([1651] 1998) theorized the modern sovereign state. His book *Leviathan* provided the first example of a social contract between free and equal individuals, paving the way for later democracies, even if Hobbes's own vision was more royalist than republican. Before him, the medieval European worldview was based on a natural hierarchy where everything held its harmonious place—*not* on equality.

Hobbes faced the problem of establishing radical equality despite the fact that human beings are so different from each other. Their bodies, brains and experiences are different. This means they have conflicting goals, which leads to perpetual civil war if left unchecked—the infamous state of nature. Hobbes's solution is to consciously pretend that differences of human constitution do not matter. The only thing that matters is that all humans can die and kill, and even the "weakest" can in principle kill the "strongest" (Leviathan 13.1).

In the state of nature, there is thus no abled norm against which "disability" can be understood. Everyone has different bodies with a shared mortality. This stance on disability is surprisingly progressive, compared to the rest of Western philosophy (Wendell 1996). But abledness is not far. By reducing bodies to their mortality, their inner complexity is black-boxed, what keeps them alive is swept under the carpet, and they become orientated toward survival above all—the contrary of Cuno's father as seen in the first section.

By establishing the imperative of survival in the state of nature, Hobbes arrives to the establishment of the Leviathan, a "mortal God," an artificial, machine-like body that is also that of the state, and that is governed by a sovereign will. The Leviathan is, of course, ultimately made of the same messy matter that made human bodies so unruly. Contrary to Descartes, Hobbes does not admit for the existence of a "mind" that could impose order on "matter." But the inconvenient truth about the frailness of the Leviathan must be forgotten for its fiction of order to prevail.

In *Disco Elysium*, Dolores Dei shares much with the Leviathan. She is a kind of mortal goddess, an embodiment of the state who ushered liberal modernity, a superior being whose "decisions" are instead framed as "inevitabilities." Like the Leviathan in Hobbes's work, she is ruthless and violent in imposing her will. Her body is perfect, far from that of mere humans as she draws them out of the state of nature. But as with the Leviathan, there are cracks in the facade.

Beneath Dolores Dei's perfect body lurk some messy body parts. She is depicted with glowing lungs on the church's stained-glass panel. They symbolize her semi-divine nature and her "love" for the world, as "the lungs are where you hold the breath of your soul" in Revacholian culture. But to the player, the lungs' image is more likely to evoke a medical diagram, referring to smoking or airway infections. After all, the "insides of [Harry's] lungs are lined with *tobacco*, a powerful antibacterial agent." The "glowing filaments" in Dolores Dei's lungs feel less like divinity all of a sudden.[6]

Dolores Dei's soul also is troubled. Like the Leviathan, she is much of an absolute self-presence—a transcendence, a logocentricism as Jacques Derrida might put it (1972). She is an embodiment of historical inevitability, after all. Derrida based his whole work on attacking the idea of sovereign self-presence that underpinned Western philosophy, showing how absolute presence is actually based on its opposite: absence. Or as STS and disability scholars might put it, there is no ghost in the machine, no soul beyond the messy assemblage, no abled perfection beyond the contingent human body-mind. Harry's mind is itself largely made of the voices of his skillset. As for Dolores Dei, she is paradoxically absent everywhere she is.

There is another semi-divine being in the game, although it only expresses itself with enough Shivers. In the dubbed version of *Disco Elysium*, the spirit of Revachol writes in all caps and speaks with a hallucinated-like voice—indeed, I first mistook it for hallucinations induced by my schizophrenia. Dros reveals that some revolutionaries also heard her voice: "I've seen kids lose their minds and start *talking* to the city ... Calling it La Revacholière," after the name of an "anthem of the World Revolution." La Revacholière unveils her identity fully during a sort of seizure Harry experiences while dancing in the church:

*SHIVERS*: "I AM LA REVACHOLIÈRE. I AM THE CITY. I AM A FRAGMENT OF THE WORLD SPIRIT, THE GENIUS LOCI OF REVACHOL. MY HEART IS THE WIND CORRIDOR. THE BOTTOM OF MY AIR IS RED. I HAVE A HUNDRED THOUSAND LUMINOUS ARMS. COME MORNING, I CARRY INDUSTRIAL DUST AND LET IT SETTLE ON TREE LEAVES. I SHAKE THE DUST FROM THOSE LEAVES AND ONTO YOUR COAT. THE

MODULATIONS OF MY VOICE ARE NOTED DOWN WITH THERMOMETERS AND BAROMETERS. YOU FEEL ME IN YOUR NOSTRILS, ON THE LITTLE HAIRS ON THE BACK OF YOUR NECK. I ALSO RESIDE IN YOUR LUNGS AND VESTIGIAL ORGANS."

Revachol's body—for it is described as a body—is radically different from the hyperabled human figure of Dolores Dei. It is made of air permeating buildings and human beings, while its arms are perhaps lamp posts lining its streets, or the lit streets themselves at night. In the Shivers skill, La Revacholière is suggested as a whiff of wind that carries concrete information about the city:

*SHIVERS*: Above the Jamrock Quarter, in the form of a raised motorway, and then the never-ending sprawl of Faubourg. High above buildings new and old, the air filled with the rumble of motor engines ... The border approaches. You cannot see. It's out of the city. Up ahead, the mist blocks all sight. A gale blows across your cheeks ... it is cold. Before you stands a tall lorry driver with sad eyes.

If La Revacholière *is* the city, it is an unfathomably complex assemblage, often a battered and desolate one in neighborhoods such as Martinaise. The thick description of the inside of Lely's body may come to mind. Unlike Dolores Dei's remote coldness, and Dora Ingerlund's desperate pleads for being treated as a normal human being, La Revacholière *does* directly speak to Harry as a kind of lover:

YOU ARE AN OFFICER OF THE CITIZENS MILITIA. *AGENTES IN REBUS*, WHEN YOU WEAR YOUR COAT, YOU WEAR MY SOUL. YOU MOVE THROUGH MY STREETS FREELY IN MOTOR CARRIAGES AND ON FOOT ... I NEED YOU. YOU CAN KEEP ME ON THIS EARTH. BE VIGILANT. I LOVE YOU.

Romantic love is portrayed in *Disco Elysium* as politically dangerous: "While the world burns, the two of you, together again, ride an aerostatic into the sunset... . Spare Revachol and you'll never hear from her again. Will you sacrifice a second chance at love to keep Revachol safe?" *Contra* Massone (this volume), I would suggest that the game is less condemning of other kinds of love and affection, especially platonic.

*Disco Elysium* establishes a path away from what romance has often been in contemporary Western societies: a private cure to political problems (Ward 2020). It does so perhaps by confronting the very idea of "cure," instead embracing illness and disability as fundamental parts of existence (Clare 2017). La Revacholière expresses her platonic love for Harry through his affiliation with the RCM, the city's much-disliked police force that is revealed at the end of the game to be one of the only somehow successful remnants of the Communist revolution. A skill quite similar to Shivers is Esprit de Corps, which represents Harry's link to the police and offers scenes—sometimes in real-time—happening elsewhere at the RCM.

*ESPRIT DE CORPS*: Somewhere under the curved roof of a former silk factory, shaped like a ladybird with two chimneys, Police Captain Ptolemy Pryce sits behind a

> heavy wooden desk. Resident medic Nix Gottlieb pours him coffee. It's silent in the captain's office ... They speak of change. The city. The tension on the streets. They speak of the events of April and the blood on the streets in May.

Explicitly made up of "half-brothers" and "half-sisters," RCM is arguably Harry's chosen family. While relations with other RCM agents are regularly mocking and conflictual, the other police officers on the ground in Martinaise show remarkable patience and empathy, supporting Harry despite his eccentricities. At the end of the game, the RCM is most likely to take Harry back, except in unusual playthroughs.

One of these police colleagues is obviously Kim Kitsuragi, who happens to be an excellent example of the contingency of the abled norm. Beyond his reserved nature, meticulousness, professionalism and intense passions which likely place him on the autism spectrum[7]—Kim has a disability: myopia. Wearing glasses is the norm rather than the exception in contemporary industrialized urban areas, but in Revachol, it is socially considered as an impairment. Kim's self-esteem is clearly affected by it, and he can be called an ableist slur such as "binoclard."

Another police officer who is highly supportive of Harry, though often overlooked in favor of Kim, is Jean Vicquemare. Likely Harry's best friend before the former's amnesia, ill with clinical depression,[8] Jean is forced to watch his original partner becoming oblivious of him, and running off with a policeman from another station. Yet again, he most likely takes Harry back, regardless of the latter's antics, at the end of the game. The RCM, like La Revacholière and unlike Dolores Dei, is a dis/abled entity.

## 12.4 Conclusion: an encounter with the Phasmid

"Something beautiful is going to happen," reads one of the possible graffiti that Harry can paint on a wall. In *Disco Elysium*'s fan communities, this phrase is often interpreted as referring to the unexpected appearance of the Insulindian Phasmid at the end of the game, after the long dialogue with Dros the Deserter. Meeting the Phasmid is a supernatural encounter, but it is a very different one from the scene with Dora Ingerlund (depicted as Dolores Dei) in Harry's dream not long before. Whereas Dolores Dei stood for absolute, sovereign self-presence, the Phasmid is an assemblage without a supplement of soul:

> Now I will tell you what it's like for me. For me it is a series of half-lit images. A kind of darkness, being intruded upon. Transient. Dim. Moist. Shapes of plants and animals. And *internal* sensations. A swarm of sounds, tiny vibrations on the inside of my forearms—all speak of complexities totally beyond my understanding. I am at the end of a narrow funnel. Weightless. So light it only feels like *something* to be me. In truth—perhaps I'm nothing? I certainly do not have a soul. And if I did, it would never ache.

The Phasmid elicits staring because of its sudden and unexpected apparition, a cryptozoological being stumbling into serious political discussions with Dros the Deserter. Its sheer embodiment, however, makes it extraordinary: a stick insect several meters tall, seemingly *oversized* to impossible proportions. The Insulindian Phasmid is believed to be nonexistent by most in *Disco Elysium* because its body fails the norms of a proper insect.

The Phasmid's mind also fails the norms of a "proper" nonhuman animal, in that it is capable of intelligent speech and cognition. A hierarchy of ability between humans and other animals has been invoked to justify exploiting or destroying the latter (Taylor 2017). The Phasmid escapes the human-made ability norms imposed on its kind and reveals that other animals—and perhaps yet-unknown, "inanimate" beings in the cosmos—also do:

> I am a relatively median lifeform—while it is you [humans] who are total, extreme madness. A volatile simian nervous system, ominously new to the planet... . There is an almost unanimous agreement between the birds and the plants that you are going to destroy us all... . You are a violent and irrepressible miracle. The vacuum of cosmos and the stars burning in it are afraid of you. Given enough time you would wipe us all out and replace us with nothing—just by accident.

It is in this endgame conversation that *Disco Elysium*'s engagements with the Anthropocene, even if brief, become clearest. Perhaps humanity's responsibility would be to acknowledge the "volatility" of its brain—"with all of creation reflected in your forebrain ... the highest of hells, a kaleidoscope of fire and writhing glass"—instead of holding on to abled ideals about itself and the sovereign state. In other words, one should perhaps listen to the Insulindian Phasmid and La Revacholière rather than to Dolores Dei.

## Notes

1. This chapter is specially indebted to two people. First to Stefano Guzzini for convincing me that classical International Relations realism—the original lens of this chapter—is actually not that interesting, especially compared to actual experiences of disabled people. Second, to Rune Saugmann for discussions about messy embodiments, for inspiring the point about staring and for providing occasions to reflect on what it means politically to feel more like Vicquemare than like Vic. ⏎
2. While this appears to be an obvious reference to Chernobyl in the Soviet Union, the Revachol generator's mixed legacy of communism and social-democracy may suggest a partial reference to Fukushima in Japan, thus placing the accident in relation to capitalism. ⏎
3. Ways of discussing schizophrenia are highly debated in social theory and activism (LeFrançois, Menzies, and Reaume 2013). I write from my perspective of someone

who is diagnosed with schizophrenia and had self-labeled with schizophrenia or psychosis in the years prior. ⏎

4. The Pigs, with her delusions and incoherent behavior, also arguably has psychosis, though her character would appear as a critique of policing rather than of capitalism more broadly (see Rossdale, this volume). ⏎
5. Harry has a "bad ass learning disability," both by his own admission and in Cuno's eyes, and has "learning disabilities" for his police colleagues Jean Vicquemare and Judit Minot. The game does not deepen these claims, though. ⏎
6. *Disco Elysium*'s writers were possibly inspired by the romanticization of tuberculosis as indicating a sensitive and tormented soul in 19th-century European literature (Sontag 1978), though also likely by their own nicotine addictions. ⏎
7. In an workshop session with the book editors and contributors, ex-ZA/UM writer Martin Luiga told me: "I would not know whether Kim is specifically autistic. He has certainly not been diagnosed in-world, that kind of things is not prioritized in post-war Revachol. But I don't think that there exists a really neurotypical type. It is thus justified to see Kim as on the autism spectrum." This adds to the running theme of a lack of abled, here neurotypical, ideal. I myself have an Asperger's diagnosis. ⏎
8. In the same workshop session, Luiga added that "Harry and Jean have co-dependent personality disorder" with Jean being an "amphetamine addict." ⏎

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# 13 The ecstasy of ruin

## Sartre, euphoria and the pleasure of undoing

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### Introduction

> Shall I awake in a few months, a few years, exhausted, disappointed, in the midst of fresh ruins? I should like to understand myself properly before it is too late.
>
> —Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (1964, 137)

Harry wakes up amid destruction: a ruined room, an aching body, a devastated city. Pulled from the soothing embrace of "warm, primordial blackness," our protagonist is thrust into a battered "limbed and headed machine." The art supports this sense of estrangement. The world is simultaneously too dark, too bright, familiar yet deeply alien. The detective is as lost as the player: he has no idea who he is, why he is there, or what happened the night before. All he can do is wander among the debris, slowly piecing together the residue of his past self. But while he might have "holes in his brain," there is no emptiness in the destruction surrounding him—no less after the storm, just something else.

The opening sequence of *Disco Elysium* not only sets up the game's tone and guides the player into the mystery but also dives headfirst into the deeply existential themes explored by the game. After all, every aftermath is inevitably tethered to its past—to a time before the fall. And this is where the game starts, with an unspoken question: what came before the aftermath? Before the pain, before the nausea? Neither Harry nor Martinaise are *tabulae rasae*. Despite the game's highly customizable interface and its emphasis on role-playing, the player is immersed in a journey of reconstruction intimately linked to the past, not separated from it. This connection is vividly represented by Harry's estranged relationship with his own body, which does not appear out of nothing, untainted and free, but is already "hurting. Longing. Dancing to Disco Music." This plight extends beyond our protagonist's miserable state and encompasses the equally hurting, equally longing, equally alive Martinaise, its colorful denizens and even the players themselves.

Even if forgotten, misinterpreted or misunderstood, the past marks the present. Much like Harry, the player is ensnared not just within the physical confines of the map but within the boundaries of Harry's existence. This encapsulation is the essence of the game, which focuses on navigating the crevices between past and future and the cyclical nature of ruin and rebirth.

While there are better chapters specifically engaging with Revachol's collective amnesia in this book, Harry's oblivion is a necessary entry point to engage with what this chapter is all about: euphoria. Or, in other words, the pleasure that so often precedes destruction: the high of the drugs, the passion of infatuation, the ramping up of a revolution—or even the moment before pulling the trigger. This analysis aims to uncover how the game engages with existential philosophy and themes to reflect on the human condition, offering insights into the cyclical nature of euphoria and despair, as well as the search for meaning in the aftermath of both personal and collective crises. While Harry's malaise is quite literal, it is easy to see it as a fitting manifestation of Sartre's conceptualization of nausea: the metaphysical revulsion caused by the raw reality of existence, the overwhelming, instinctive reaction to an inherently absurd world. This nausea is the paralyzing dread that accompanies the realization that humans first exist without inherent purpose and only later define their essence through their choices and actions—the dizziness of the perspective of freedom. And what could serve as a more fitting metaphor than a video game that hinges on player choice?

However, first of all, what exactly is euphoria? While, as humans, we can all relate to the sensation, the definition is surprisingly slippery. Originating from the Greek word εὐφορία, which combines εὖ (eu, meaning "well") and φέρω (pherō, meaning "to bear"), it historically denoted a state of being "healthy" or "bearing well" (Liddell and Scott [1915] 1940, 726,). Paradoxically, in its contemporary understanding, euphoria is often pathologized. In medical literature, it refers to heightened, excessive well-being (Kesselring and Klement 2001, 183; Duncan, Schmidt, and Agrawal 2014, 20), often characterized by feelings of physical and mental elation significantly more intense than the normal emotional responses to positive events or experiences. It is a very embodied reaction. Racing heartbeats, heated skin, restless limbs. Neurologically, it fires up several key areas of the brain and neurotransmitters that regulate mood, pleasure and reward responses, including quite crucially in this context, the limbic system (Berridge and Kringelbach 2008, 458).

Beyond medical contexts, the term maintains similar connotations: a state of unjustified, excessive happiness experienced in short, intense bursts (Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "euphoria"). An understanding that highlights its deeply transitory nature, as well as the crucial implicit existence of its aftermath—the inevitable crash following the high. In this context, I am framing euphoria not as a moment of pure bliss but as a deeply embodied state of arousal unfolding in the perceived proximity to unadulterated joy. Like the Lacanian concept of jouissance (Žižek 2006, 79–80), I argue that euphoria involves pursuing something, regardless of its attainability. But while in the case of jouissance, it is the desire for a pre-symbolic

state of completeness, a return to the Real, euphoria is the misplaced yearning for the Symbolic: an (im)possible future that is yet to materialize.

To understand the role of euphoria in *Disco Elysium*, it is necessary to understand Sartre's conceptualization of "bad faith," *mauvaise foi*. In *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre [1943] 1984, 86), Sartre uses the term to refer to the self-deception in which humans indulge to flee from the overwhelming burden of freedom. The comfortable nest of delusions or distractions that we crawl into rather than face the often uncomfortable truth and the weight of our choices. In other words, the panacea to the aforementioned nausea. Through an analysis of the game's narrative, characters and setting, this chapter will delve into *Disco Elysium*'s portrayal of substances, love, politics and their overlaps through Sartre's notions of bad faith, reflecting on the game's deeply empathetic exploration of the challenges that accompany the pursuit of authenticity.

> I am. I am, I exist, I think, therefore I am I am because I think, why do I think? I don't want to think anymore, I am because I think that I don't want to be, I think that I ... because ... ugh!
>
> —Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*

## 13.1 Chemical Euphoria

### *Addiction and self-delusion: the Horrific Necktie*

Substances are the most straightforward representation of the addictive and destructive potential of bad faith in *Disco Elysium*. They serve both as a game mechanic and as a powerful narrative device. Mechanically, they function as convenient "power-ups," narratively relevant stat modifiers that can help the player boost the numbers needed to pass specific checks at the detriment of others (alcohol, for instance, increases emotional or social skills like Empathy or Suggestion, reflecting a state of disinhibition while simultaneously diminishing physical abilities, indicative of impaired motor skills). Narratively, they are a red thread choking, entangling and connecting all the inhabitants of Martinaise. Starting with Harry, of course. From the outset, it is obvious that the detective is an addict. "There's an upholstery of alcohol" underneath his skin, his hands are those of "someone who's smoked for at least twenty years," and a "fine web of scarring covers the back of [his] right hand." A condition that becomes more and more evident as he navigates the crime scene of his current existence (in some way, a living autopsy of the self), which can culminate with the acquisition of his biggest enabler: the painfully garish, obnoxiously colorful, Horrific Necktie. A successful Inland Empire check will guarantee the piece of fabric a voice of its own, a hilariously obnoxious personality and the very specific purpose of pushing Harry away from responsibility and toward the embrace of drugs.

The Horrific Necktie is Harry's "spirit animal," both a "nemesis and friend"—and a wonderful metaphor to explore the complexity of addiction. Chemical euphoria has

a dual nature: first, of course, comes the immediate, profound bodily alteration of senses. But second, more subtly, the anticipation of an (idealized) future high becomes a substitute for the lack of (idealized) futures. Through an existentialist lens, the necktie transcends mere objecthood, gaining its own consciousness thanks to the meaning given to it by Harry—so much meaning, in fact, to emerge as a conscious being in Harry's imagination. The necktie was something bought on impulse in the midst of his depression—something fun, colorful, in stark contrast with the bleakness of his current existence. A store-bought identity and a paradox in its own right, as despite its presentation as a distinct and personal object, it also blatantly acknowledges its own mass-produced identity (labeled as Joopson AS catalogue no. J327). This duality mirrors the capitalist practice of commodifying and selling the idea of happiness, a concept that ultimately reveals itself to be an empty assurance. It became the embodiment of fun and happiness, something Disco, possibly marking the beginning of Harry's "Disco" persona. A choice that reflects nostalgia for a time that never existed and for a future that is equally unreachable, to the point of being almost alien, a distant, colorful, fun, "party planet."

*BEAUTIFUL NECKTIE*: And from that moment on—we rode together. The rest of your clothes were still normal back then. But we took care of that soon enough.

Like substances, clothing becomes another misguided manifestation of bad faith in Harry's life—a false and destructive beacon of salvation from his existential nausea. The point is that Harry did not have fun. Not really.

For Sartre, the image of an object is never separate from the consciousness that perceives it (Sartre [1940] 2004, 5). In "The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination," he frames imagination as one of the fundamental faculties of human consciousness, distinct from perception (8). Imagination, like substances, is a double-edged sword: it can liberate or lead the Imagineer further into delusion and self-deception (13). Thus, the necktie becomes a tangible, conscious reflection of both Harry's self-destructive impulses as well as his desperate chase of pleasure. The Horrific Necktie looks like a noose. Its placement on the fan blade is just one of the many implications that Harry used it for either a botched suicide attempt or autoerotic asphyxiation. It is important to recognize that those aspects are not mutually exclusive and allude to fundamentally the same thing: a failed escape. This highlights the subtlety of the line between pleasure and pain, life and death, and the complex dimension of existential highs. What hurts us can also feel good; to feel alive, we need to move closer to death, and the experience of destruction might feel absolutely elating.

*YOU*: Did we ... have any fun?

*BEAUTIFUL NECKTIE*: Truthfully? Not a lot. I did everything a multi-patterned necktie can do to help a man. I mean, I tried to get you to do all the fun things: Drink beer, drink wine, drink cider, go to parties with young people around and drink beer and cider; do drugs too, so you don't fall asleep ... You had some fun. But not enough to heal you.

The tie can go out in a literal blaze of glory, transforming into a Molotov during the Tribunal, one of the key narrative beats of the game. In this dramatic transformation, the tie sheds its role as a ghastly symbol of Harry's despair. It becomes something "beautiful"—a crucial element of his immediate survival, contrasting sharply with its previous association with his gradual downfall.

### *Lost keys and locked doors: Idiot Doom Spiral*

In *Disco Elysium*, Harry is far from the only character ensnared by the grip of addiction. Substances, both legal and illegal, permeate the game, weaving into the lives of its inhabitants, each entwined in a deeply personal battle. From Cuno and his father to the inebriated masses at the Fishermen's Village, the enigmatic Klaasje Amadou and the tragically central figure of Lely, the hanged man, substance use is a thread that binds the narrative, revealing the complex interplay between personal demons and societal fractures.

A particularly poignant example is the absurd tale of George, also known as Idiot Doom Spiral. Once an entrepreneur with a promising future and now one of the drunks hanging around in the Fishermen's Village, George's life spiraled out of control over something as trivial as losing his keys. A seemingly minor incident led to a chain of calamities: losing his home, company and girlfriend and even landing in jail for lacking identification. His entire identity and sense of self are inaccessible, locked behind a fatefully closed door. What is immediately obvious is the absurdity of the situation. George could have had someone unlock his apartment, wait for a colleague to open the door of his office or even properly look for his keys, highlighting the self-inflicted nature of his downfall. This is further illustrated when Harry discovers one of George's lost possessions (a jacket he previously mourned) and attempts to return it, only to be met with denial. George's rejection of help and his subsequent surrender to alcohol and drugs is a stark abandonment of Sartre's ideals of authenticity, a dive into bad faith and an unsettling comfort found within a self-wrought spiral of despair.

George's story is more than a personal tragedy; it is also a grim mirror of Harry's potential future and a testament to the systemic failures within the world of Elysium. Just like Harry's, his story cannot be truly understood when considering the broader context of Martinaise, a city still haunted by the remnants of a burst economic bubble and unfulfilled ultraliberal promises. Within this context, the details of George's tale become more sinister: he claims to have lost his keys while on a jog to manage the stress of his new position of leadership in a company he contributed to found—the same company that changed the lock of his office without his knowledge. This shows that the closed doors haunting George's life become as physical as they are metaphorical, while the actual reason for his current situation is left ambiguous. Was it a somewhat conscious escape from the weight of responsibility? A failure to cope with his business's collapse? The consequences of an ousting by his own company? Or perhaps the manifestation of a neurological condition? No single explanation can fully account for George's fall, nor does any

exclude his personal agency in his demise. But they place it in context, offering a nuanced, empathetic exploration of addiction, desire, despair and euphoria.

*Disco Elysium* also introduces a meta-narrative layer through its portrayal of drug use, which functions as a core gameplay mechanic. While the use of substances can bring more lasting consequences, such as diminished health or morale, the drawbacks do not hinder the player's ability to complete the game; in fact, they often simplify progression. This dynamic draws the player into the narrative—the thrill of "winning" or passing a skill check translates Harry's in-game high to the player, creating a tangible connection. Furthermore, drug use in the game can unlock unique dialogue paths and unveil deeper layers of the protagonist's personality and history while also obscuring certain opportunities and skewing his perception of the narrative. Ultimately, the player's choices regarding substance use in the game reflect their role-playing style and personal values rather than being part of a prescribed path, letting them choose how they wish to engage with his character and the world around him. These choices offer a deeper level of immersion, as they allow the player to shape Harry's journey through addiction, either reinforcing or challenging the darker aspects of his personality.

There is also an addictive element inherent in the game's success mechanics. From a neurological standpoint, achieving these in-game victories triggers a dopamine release, akin to the pleasure response in real-life substance use. This reward mechanism can foster a cycle of behavior that mirrors actual addiction, potentially leading to a dependency where the absence of such achievements results in a sense of withdrawal (Koepp et al. 1998, 266–67; Murch and Clark 2016, 101). Interestingly, the game's narrative structure does not inherently penalize substance abuse but rather frames it as a facet of a larger, complex world. It is completely possible to reach a favorable game ending while embracing a drug-fueled playstyle. In most cases, the adventure ends with Harry returning to the RCM—be it with Kim, Cuno or by himself, regardless of whether he actually solved the case. What is unanimously considered "the bad ending" of the game sees Harry joining Idiot Doom Spiral and the rest of the drunken crew in the Fisherman's village. It is not easy to get, as it only materializes if the detective continues to use and abuse substances throughout the game, has not done any self-reflection in that regard (represented by the internalized thought "Waste Land of Reality"), and is alone, without either Cuno or Kim at his side. In other words, Harry must be lonely, disconnected and completely unwilling to change, choosing a self-destructive spiral over authenticity.

*SHIVERS*: A grey rain falls on Martinaise. The city soaks in it, cold and dripping. Waves hit the concrete breakers. The homeless huddle by the fires behind the fences. There, among the shacks, is your home. Stay. Have a drink. Forever.

Despite the bleak tone, even this ending offers a sliver of hope through Jean Vicquemare, his RCM superior, who leaves open a path to redemption if he manages to stay sober for ten months. Harry might not be ready now, but maybe, one day, he will be able to escape the lure of bad faith. Or he could end up just as Idiot Doom

Spiral—unchanging, lost in a long, ongoing chemically induced daydream, unwilling to look for the keys to his freedom.

## 13.2 Romantic Euphoria

### *Saints, songs and shadows of desire: Dolores Dei and the Paledriver*

The biochemical processes of love and drug use share notable similarities, primarily in how they activate the brain's reward system (Seshadri 2016, 561; Potts 2008, 20; Fisher, Aron, and Brown 2005, 2176; Fisher et al. 2016, 4). It manifests both mentally and physically—dopamine and epinephrine flare up, causing racing hearts, shaking hands and the infamous "butterflies." Serotonin levels, connected to mood and emotion regulation, may decrease in the early stages of love, leading to a compelling desire to repeat the experience (Esch and Stefano 2005, 184). Over time, both can lead to a form of tolerance, where the initial intensity diminishes, requiring more effort or substance to achieve similar emotional highs, leading to the obsessive focus on the romantic partner, contributing to the single-minded attention often seen in early-stage relationships (Fisher et al. 2016, 4). In other words, love is, indeed, a drug. And it can be as destructive as its chemical equivalent.

The song "On the Western Plains" poignantly encapsulates this facet of romantic euphoria in *Disco Elysium*. This haunting ballad is relayed to Harry by the Paledriver, a lorry driver whose mind has been warped by her frequent journeys through the Pale. The song narrates a tragic tale: a woman falls deeply in love with a boiadeiro (a Pale cowboy) who vows to marry her upon his return from the Western Plains. However, when he returns, he is irreversibly changed. Faced with his fiancée's pleas to settle down, he reacts with brutality, strangling her and discarding her body in the river.

*PALEDRIVER*: "You have to understand—a true boiadeiro needs a whole horizon to himself. He can't be tied down by man or woman. His beloved was selfish. She didn't know what it meant to love a boiadeiro."

Yet there is a profound irony in the Paledriver's recounting of this story. She herself has never experienced what it is like to be in love with a boiadeiro; her understanding is filtered through the distorting lens of the Pale, which has left her adrift in a sea of borrowed memories and hallucinations. "They are someone's memories, boy," she explains, "What difference does it make if it's me or not? They're beautiful. That is all that matters. Beautiful and true." Her fixation on an actor she has never actually seen is as much a destructive addiction as any drug: a desperate attempt to evade the overwhelming existential dread, the paralysis that comes with unfettered freedom.

While the Paledriver represents an extreme of this type of love in *Disco Elysium*, this aspect is most notably epitomized by the character of Dolores Dei. From the outset, the shadow of Harry's ex-something haunts him throughout the game.

Letters, smells and vagrant memories keep surfacing over and over again, simmering at the border of Harry's consciousness. In Harry's mind, his former lover, Dora Igerlund, is feverishly intertwined with the saintly image of Dolores Dei, a revered, saint-like figure within the game's world. She becomes the literal embodiment of perfection: "humanity's young mother, a perfect mother. Insultingly beautiful." An Innocence, in Elysium, is "a continuous, compressed event, a sacred human being." Six years after their breakup, Harry is still hooked on the distorted, idealized memory of a love that never existed. Harry was never married to Dora, she never gave birth to his children, and she was as much a flawed, complex, messy human being as he was. This is where Harry's obsession lies—he is not mourning the loss of Dora, of his actual painful, messy relationship, but the perception of himself that could only exist about the idealized version of that love.

*YOU*: "Was I cool?"
*DOLORES DEI*: "The coolest ..." She closes her eyes: "With your leather jacket and boot cut pants. Smoking in the bus stop. I wanted you to be the rest of my life that day. And you were—some of it, at least."

A process from which not even Dora was immune. In one of her old letters to Harry, she describes a gripping sadness that consumes her while she is at work, only to lift upon returning to him. This reflects the intense, euphoric feeling that comes with falling in love—and its addictive force:

> I know it will be like this until late afternoon when I get off the 42—and walk back to you... . You, you ... Every step I take will get lighter. It almost makes me run! Sometimes I do. I can't believe I met you. I can't believe the happiness I feel with you. You have a vast, vast soul and I will always, always, always come back to it. Kisses, kisses, kisses.

This concept aligns seamlessly with Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of being-for-others. Our being-for-itself is inextricably linked to our relationships with others, as the gaze of the Other plays a crucial role in shaping our self-perception. Sartre explains that when another observes us, they bring into existence a version of ourselves that we do not entirely control, "a being which is my being, but which is outside it" (Sartre [1943] 2007, 301). The Other's gaze offers a unique window into aspects of our identity we might not otherwise perceive, yet this gaze also challenges our autonomy and can trap us in a fixed identity.

In relationships, our interactions with others—whether we meet their expectations or assert our own individuality—require constant decision-making about our behavior and responses. These decisions are manifestations of our freedom; through them, we shape and explore our identity. However, we cannot fully control how others perceive us. Additionally, both our being-in-itself and the Other's being-in-itself are constantly evolving, making relationships inherently dynamic and susceptible to bad faith. Sartre warns that bad faith arises when we

refuse to acknowledge either our freedom or the Other's, resulting in attempts to reduce the Other to an object or deny their subjectivity (Sartre [1943] 2007, 361).

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre frames love as a strategy for dealing with the "troublesome dimension of being-for-others" (Wyatt 2006, 2). When in love, in fact, a person seeks to possess the other, making them an object, both solidifying their presence in the world and trapping them in an unchanging identity (Sartre [1943] 2007, 474–75). It is a desire for possession that transcends physical terms, encompassing freedom and consciousness, and longs for a fusion that is ultimately impossible. After all, the Other constitutes, in his subjectivity, a fundamentally inaccessible foreign world (475). While our actions influence how we are perceived by the Other, ultimately, the Other shapes our being-for-others through their freedom and subjectivity (471). Bad faith exists when we continue to live in the delusion of the Other refusing to engage with the freedom of the loved one (475). Love is possible, according to Sartre, but it requires recognition of the other as a free subject, which Harry could not do with Dora. After all, there is a reason why, in the dream sequence, she is on her way to the airdrome, begging to be finally let go and to be seen as her own free, flawed and autonomous individual (Wyatt 2006, 6).

### *Desire and survival: Klaasje Amandou*

The theme of love, illusion and delusion is poignantly explored through the character of Klaasje Amandou in *Disco Elysium*. As Harry's neighbor at the Whirling-in-Rags and a pivotal figure in the murder investigation, Klaasje—once a beauty contest winner and now a spy—becomes a perfect canvas for the projections of her many admirers. She is acutely aware of her allure, of her "drug-like" effect on others, which she lives as both a blessing and a curse and pragmatically uses as a survival tool. Among those captivated by Klaasje are Ruby, a lorry driver with a past tangled in drug smuggling, and Titus Hardie, the leader of a union-affiliated local group. Both harbor complex feelings for her—pity, desire, affection, longing—and are fiercely protective to the extent of claiming responsibility for the murder of Lely, the hanged man at the center of the narrative, framing it as vigilante justice to safeguard her.

However, neither Ruby nor Titus truly perceives Klaasje as she is. Their visions of her as the "Miss Oranje Disco Dancer" are constructs of their own desires and fears, more reflective of themselves than of Klaasje's authentic self. Ruby's lorry even houses a poster of an old-time actress who resembles Klaasje—an old-time "ingenue" with a short "gently tragic" life—underscoring the contrast between the real Klaasje and how she is perceived: as a victim, to be saved and protected, and as a prize, to be taken and retained. This perception is challenged by her relationship with Lely, the hanged man, whom they see as an aggressive, dangerous monster of a man. And not without reason. It is revealed that Colonel Ellis "Lely" Kortenaer was an Oranjese mercenary whose past was paved in blood. A monster who had no business associating with somebody like Klaasje or, at least, the version of her Titus and Ruby choose to manifest. Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of being-for-others (Sartre [1943] 2007, 301–2) is vividly illustrated in these dynamics. The characters project their

interpretations onto Klaasje and Lely, shaping their identities based on personal beliefs and views, thereby negating Klaasje's and Lely's autonomy. Titus and the Hardie Boys see themselves as protectors, aligning with their broader self-image as unofficial law enforcers. Their defense of Klaasje, culminating in a false murder confession, is as much about maintaining their guardian status as it is about her welfare.

Ruby, on the other hand, views her potential escape with Klaasje as an act of redemption, transcending protection to rewrite her own narrative, tarnished by her connections with the crime group La Puta Madre and her entanglements with Evrart. Positioning herself as Klaasje's savior, Ruby seeks salvation from her own troubled past. Klaasje's relationship with Lely is an exception. Their entanglement is complex and murky, characterized by the usual cocktail of chemically induced euphoria, fear and desperation. Klaasje "partied" with Lely—as she partied with Titus, some of the Hardie Boys and Ruby. What makes it different is the raw mutual understanding that permeates their relationship. Both nameless, rootless, haunted, severed from familial and national ties, found an unusual sort of solace in each other's company. Klaasje is not oblivious to Lely's bloody past. On the contrary, it excites her. They share a similarly ruthless, deeply survival-oriented nature—with Lely's physical intimidation being the perfect match for Klaasje's equally dangerous charm.

*KLAASJE (MISS ORANJE DISCO DANCER)*: "Why would I be scared? Your mother probably never told you this, but girls are evil. Had I the physical robustness and social support, I would be tearing it up Soldier of the Apocalypse-style."

Klaasje and Lely's relationship may superficially seem to be a classic case of bad faith. They indulge in a reality skewed from their true selves and situations, choosing immediate pleasure over confronting their deeper existential realities. However, unlike Klaasje's interactions with the others, her connection with Lely is marked by a mutual acknowledgment of their vulnerabilities and complexities. This mutual recognition can be seen as authentic in Sartre's framework, where both parties see and accept each other's freedom and individuality without the usual societal masks (Sartre [1943] 2007, 471). The abrupt end of Lely's life prevented their relationship from evolving further, leaving the question of whether it would eventually succumb to bad faith or continue on its path of mutual authentic recognition. This unresolved aspect adds to the existential ambiguity that Sartre's philosophy often explores—the tension between freedom, responsibility and the inherent uncertainty of human relationships.

### *Iosef Dros: between ideology and infatuation*

Iosef Dros, the Deserter, is the final character in a long line who projects his delusions onto Klaasje. He is also the true killer at the heart of the mystery. His fixation, entirely one-sided and even more intense than those previously discussed, manifests as a visceral voyeuristic obsession. Klaasje never even saw Dros. By

watching, spying and lurking, he creates a parasocial entanglement that slowly transforms into infatuation. In his eyes, Miss Oranje Disco Dancer becomes a receptacle for memories, regrets and even, maybe, the tiniest sliver of hope. However, when Klaasje fails to meet his expectations, particularly due to her involvement with Lely—whom Dros views as a symbol of despised capitalist forces—he resolves to kill them both during their next intimate moment.

To understand his motivations, it is key to consider his history. Iosef Dros was thrust into the chaos of revolution as a teenager. Recruited at "sixteen, fifteen" as a volunteer revolutionary soldier, he soon became a commissaire politique: a knight-philosopher of the Revolution, a future human, expected not only to ensure that the militia followed the ideology of the Commune but also to embody it. But Dros was just a teenager, and during Operation Death Blow, he got scared and abandoned his post. When he returned, all he found was the aftermath of a massacre. This is where Dros stopped being Iosef and became the Deserter, condemning himself to an eternal relentless fight.

*THE DESERTER*: "You could say I misunderstood the historic role of the proletariat and thought Mazovian socioeconomics were fallible. For a second I doubted the irreducible laws of historic materialism."
*THE DESERTER*: "A second is all it took."
*YOU*: "For what?"
*THE DESERTER*: "For Reaction to take hold."

Dros is a tragic figure, representing the danger of indoctrination and dogmatic political approaches. With all his bitterness and malice, it is easy for the player to forget that Dros was a teenager forced onto a battlefield during a hopeless battle, meant to be slaughtered in the name of the revolution, like all of his lost companions. He sees himself not as a human but as a tool of the revolution, considering his desertion as a quasi-mechanical malfunction, a "Reaction" akin to an anti-aircraft gun's failure. Despite his bitterness, he never sees how unreasonable the revolution's demands were—to have a teenager become a quasi-mythical figure, a herald of ideology. Dros's ideological essence was imposed upon him before he could define his existence, leading to a profound misalignment between who he is (existence) and whom he is expected to be (essence). This imposed self-objectification drives Dros into a life that is fundamentally not his own, where the guilt and responsibility he feels for the massacre are inexorably intertwined with the absurdity of the expectations placed upon him. This guilt is perhaps not just for his perceived failure but also for his inability to reconcile the ideal he was supposed to embody with the reality of his human condition (Sartre [1943] 2007, 86–116; Camus 1991, 54–56).

Moreover, the narrative reveals that Dros's mental state is influenced by the presence of the Insulindian Phasmid, whose pheromones not only conceal its existence but also prolong Dros's life, sustaining his ideological zeal. This raises questions about the extent of the pheromones' impact: Is their influence the root of his enduring state, or is Dros's reluctance to relinquish the euphoria and sense of

purpose they afford him? Are the pheromones actually overpowering him, or rather, akin to a drug, are they an avenue to avoid confronting the weight of his freedom?

*YOU*: "I think he's addicted to that thing."
*KIM KITSURAGI*: "Like a drug?"
*YOU*: "He has displayed addictive behavior. And not just to painkillers."
*KIM KITSURAGI*: "His pupils appeared to be dilated. They still are ..." He examines the catatonic man's eyes.
*EMPATHY*: "It's not just chemical."
*YOU*: "It's ... as if he's infatuated with it."

In this context, it is extremely significant that he expresses his "love" and obsession by leaving Dried May Bells on Klaasje's balcony. The fact that he leaves the flower instead of just watching, peeping and slithering through the holes is also relevant. They are not only a symbol of the revolution but also a romantic gesture, a symbol of spring and renewal. The May Bells are a weak attempt to make himself seen—to reach out, if briefly, toward something more human anything he has allowed himself to be.

There are indeed parallels between the mercenary and the deserter, starting from their military education and indoctrination, both happening at a similar age (one at the Military Academy in Vredefort and the other at the Ecole de Controle Aérien). But while Lely was not "the flag-waving kind" and more the "making money killing people kind," Dros never let go of the flag. He could never shed his identity as the Deserter and embrace being Iosef Dros—human, fallible and free. He remained in the illusion (bad faith) of being a tool for a cause, rejecting his agency, his freedom, his guilt and his humanness, and blaming the system for his misery. At the end of the day, Dros is fundamentally as ruthless (if not more) than Lely but chooses a life in shadow, cooped up in the islet and looking at life unfolding in Martinaise through the scope of his old rifle and occasionally murdering those who he disliked. Petty murders are justified through the warped lens of ideals, which are not victims of a lost cause but of human fallibility. Rage. Jealousy. Envy. As he does with Lely. But was it for politics? Was it for love? Was it for drugs (the phasmid influence)? And is there really a difference between those factors?

In essence, Dros's narrative embodies a profound interplay between existing in a complex context, victimization and personal agency. He emerges as a dramatic figure marked by the indelible scars left by youthful indoctrination and the harsh realities of Revachol's tumultuous sociopolitical landscape. Yet his story is also characterized by moments of decisive action, reflecting a complex agency that defies simple categorization. This duality underscores the intricate dynamics at the heart of *Disco Elysium*, the delicate balance between the forces that shape us and our capacity to shape ourselves in response. Dros's experience serves as a poignant precursor to the rest of the chapter. It illustrates how the intoxicating allure of ideological fervor can both empower and ensnare, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of political euphoria's seductive, often destructive nature.

## 13.3 Political Euphoria

### *A wild goose chase: the political quests*

If love, delusion and communism are interlaced in the figure of Dros, the player can further explore this connection through the political vision quest lines. In my first playthrough, Harry committed himself to bringing "communism many times greater than any attempted before." After literally sniffing out possible comrades and joining an unnecessarily secretive book club, I had the opportunity to read the wildly entertaining Esoteric Communism book, which explored the (super) powers of political engagement. In a rare stroke of luck, I even managed to win the red check on my first try—the matchstick tower stood for that one glorious minute. And then ... nothing. I went to the Fortress and proceeded to finish the game. I thought I locked myself out without experiencing the ending, and as the completionist that I am, I reloaded a previous save. This time, I failed the check. The tower fell. And again, nothing.

Only during my second playthrough did I notice a pattern in the political side quests. They were all thrilling, engaging wild goose chases, yet none had any real impact on the world. The Fascist path had me rebuilding a machine. The ultraliberalist journey was about chasing millionaire dreams, rebranding yourself and peddling high-concept art in exchange for vague stock market shares (complete with a personal stock ticker in the bar) and promises of grandeur. However, none of these paths swayed the game's conclusion. Every one of those impossible political dreams can be considered a manifestation of bad faith—an indulgence, a fantasy, a futile effort to claim agency on a meaningless, doomed, absurd existence. But the true question still remains: were they worth it? The answer is simple. Yes. Absolutely.

### *Love, longing and nostalgia: fascism*

> A true kingsman cannot stomach the grotesque parody of Old Revachol your home has become. Assez! Find a way to turn back time, save the Suzerainty, and give love a second chance.

In *Disco Elysium*, Harry's journey into fascism is an intense, visceral quest where his physical and existential nausea mix and intertwine. While the Communist and the Ultraliberalist paths propel Harry toward an impossible future, in his descent into fascism, the amnesiac detective finds himself literally strung along by his gut, obsessing over the construction of a time machine to resurrect a "better world." This is a purpose that reveals the deeply self-indulgent nature of his quest. For Harry does not seek a better world for others—but rather, a better world for himself. The delusion of a "time when love was still possible," where Dora never left him, and he could be seen as a "true Kingsman," the tragic hero he thinks he deserves to become. A delusion in which he can avoid the shame of his personal failings, blaming them on the sabotaging efforts of vaguely ominous outside forces—foreigners, liberals,

women. When finally facing himself in the mirror in the darkened shack, he gets lost in a fantasy that reveals the selfish root of his dilemma:

*ENDURANCE*: There's a lever in front of you. Pull it, and atomic fire blankets your beloved Revachol. Millions die in an instant. But you are spared. You, and the voice in the payphone.

*ENDURANCE*: While the world burns, the two of you, together again, ride an aerostatic into the sunset. Maybe it will work this time? Spare Revachol, and you'll never hear from her again. Will you sacrifice a second chance at love to keep Revachol safe?

In this moment, Harry is forced to see himself as the selfish, lost, pained man he is. While ultimately the game suggests that the only way to truly turn back time is by getting lost in a never-ending delusion, in perpetual bad faith—explicitly likened to the Pale-driver catatonic condition—he is still given the possibility to do so. He can push through, and in exchange for permanent nerve damage, he will have the possibility to wallow in a delusion, a literal fantasy in which he is the hero of an unrealistic, isolated version of Dora (and possibly Kim) or the personification of an unrealistic Revachol able to fill that void for him.

### *Neutrality as an act of violence: the moralist path*

Yet of all the political quests, it is perhaps the Moralist path that is most remarkable. This is the path upon which the player finds themselves when they assiduously avoid the game's more radical choices, which all channel toward other political alignments. The Moralist quest puts the player face-to-face with the Coalition of Nations, the behemoth organization whose sole focus is preserving the status quo in Revachol. Communicating with the headquarters constitutes the bulk of the questline, which culminates with Harry standing on top of the horse statue, contacting Coalition Warship Archer, a formidable artillery-equipped aerostatic balloon that functions as a primary tool of surveillance and enforcement. The Archer hovers ominously over the city and is capable of unleashing devastating firepower on Revachol in under a minute, should the city challenge the authority of the Moralist International. In contrast, the other political quests bring a clearly human element within their pursuit. Despite their absurdist naivety, they still bring a tangible, interpersonal aspect to politics, emphasized by the wildly entertaining interactions with the many characters punctuating each path. Ultimately, they give to Harry a chance to thoroughly explore the soul of Revachol, connecting with the city, its inhabitants and himself.

In contrast, there is no humanity in the Coalition, even though it claims to "represent the interests of 1.2 billion people across the world." Even its officer speaks using the Royal "We"—and while it is possible to guess the name of the second signaler, Elena, this further points toward the process of dehumanization that accompanies this route, pointing to the dangers of universalist claims. There is no love in the Archer. The airship is not only profoundly inhuman but also

fundamentally disconnected from its context—quite literally floating miles away from the community it is supposedly meant to protect and support. Both Kim, his senses and the city itself will try to hold him back to stop him from getting "lost to the Moralinterns." However, if Harry agrees to go through with his project, he will leave Kim, the Case and everything behind. Looking around one last time, he notices the "plaza you've been looking at for days. What do you hope to see now that you haven't before?." The city does not speak to him anymore. Paradoxically, this is also the only political questline that can culminate with Harry's disappearance—a sudden, unexpected "fake ending." Harry is truly gone, and with him, any chance of redemption.

In existential terms, this aspect reflects Sartre's take on political participation. He saw personal freedom and collective action as deeply interdependent, arguing that authenticity is always situated within a social context and that existentialism needs to be reconciled with a Marxist understanding of social and historical forces (Sartre [1946] 2007, 53–55; Sartre [1960] 2004, 91–94). Refusing to choose is the ultimate act of bad faith, a rejection of freedom guided by the misguided conviction that sees the maintenance of a status quo as a "safe" middle ground (Sartre [1943] 2007, 86–116). Interacting with the Archer completely thwarts this perspective, confirming that maintenance is not only as much of a political choice but often as bloody, if not more, than any other form of radical change (Arendt 1958, 236–40).

## 13.4 Conclusion

Love, drugs, politics—is everything encapsulated in bad faith? Indeed, this is the point. Bad faith and euphoria are inextricably linked; ultimately, bad faith feels good. Yet bad faith is not necessarily detrimental. On the contrary, it is an inevitable aspect of human life, essential for the individual's pursuit of authenticity. Sartre argues that human consciousness itself is a form of "nothingness," eluding precise definition except in terms of what it is not (Sartre [1943] 2007, 56–58). He asserts that humans can transcend their facticity—the sum of past facts and circumstances that constitute their current situation—through the possibilities of future actions (108–110). This philosophical stance leads to the assertion that "you are not what you are," meaning you are not solely defined by your past, and "you are what you are not," highlighting the potential for future transcendence (120). Therefore, humans are defined by a series of dual negations: what they are not and what they are not yet, inherently engaging in a state of bad faith as they navigate the contradictions between past realities and future possibilities. We experience euphoria when we engage with something, whether it be art, politics, other people or even a video game. We need to believe, to immerse ourselves in life—to create purpose out of the absurd, for ourselves to grow and actualize (126–28; Camus 1991, 54–56). However, where there is euphoria, there must inevitably be an aftermath, a reckoning. The game must end. This does not trivialize the brutality of a new beginning or the dread of the aftermath, as remarked by the Novelty Dicemaker in

the game: "It's like every time you cast a die, something disappears. An alternative ending, or an entirely different world ..."

Destruction is thus necessary to make space for renewal. This aspect is beautifully explored through the exploration of the Doomed Commercial Area. Adjacent to the Whirling-in-Rags, this area was once a bustling center of commercial activity. Harry has the opportunity to explore these destitute premises, investigating the local belief that businesses in the plaza are cursed: no enterprise can prosper without eventually facing bankruptcy. "Eventually" is the keyword here. Nothing in the game world is safe from decay, echoing reality. As the businesses in the commercial area fail as history progresses, as the Pale expands and will eventually swallow Elysium, so our time as humans in this world is ultimately bound to end.

*INLAND EMPIRE*: "After life, death. After death, life again. After the Isola, the pale. After the pale, Isola again."

The game subtly mirrors its own development history through Fortress Accident's ambitious yet doomed project, "Wirrâl Untethered," paralleling the real-world challenges faced by its developers, Fortress Occident. As recounted in an interview with Robert Kurvitz (2016), this narrative layer reveals how the struggles and failures inherent in creative endeavors can pave the way to success:

> "Honestly, from us coming to terms with reality. A year ago, we found ourselves working on this colossal, 300+ hour RPG-to-end-all-RPGs—with a small team of first-timers, and limited funds. So, we had to, you know, dial it back."
>
> (Kurvitz 2016)

It was an experience that, while it failed to reach the desired height, built the foundation to create the masterpiece that is *Disco Elysium*—not despite the struggle, the failure and the compromise but because of them. The important part is coming to terms with reality, dealing with the aftermath and finding once again the strength to rebuild. After all, Sartrean bad faith can lead not only to self-destruction but also to self-transformation. Sartre's idea of transformation is akin to radical self-reinvention—it does not inherently mean destroying oneself but rather involves a profound reevaluation and alteration of one's beliefs, values and identity in acknowledging one's freedom ([1943] 2007, 553–54). In Camus's terms, it involves embracing life's inherent absurdity and the cyclical nature of struggle and recovery, "to fade and then flourish, despair and then elate, bleed and then soothe" (Camus 1991, 54–56).

While bad faith is necessary, it is insidious. The subject may find themselves trapped in either facticity or transcendence, avoiding the pursuit of authenticity to escape the pain of existential anguish. This avoidance often leads to self-inflicted misery: by refusing to acknowledge an end, we also deprive ourselves of a new beginning. Yet *Disco Elysium* exhibits a deep understanding and compassion for this human inclination. Rather than condemning bad faith, the game recognizes the

many paths Harry—and the player—can take to cope with life's complexities. Everyone has moments of avoidance or denial. Destruction is painful. Transformation is jarring. Existence is terrifying. Still, it is never too late to escape bad faith, to relinquish euphoria and to confront the aftermath. To wake up amidst the debris. However, doing so requires acknowledging that all journeys, including Harry's, must end. Time in the game passes inexorably, and the week in Revachol unfolds regardless of whether Harry solves the case, how and if he confronts his demons, and his struggle with his sense of self. It implies that to avoid pain or change by remaining static is to deny a fundamental aspect of existence (Sartre [1943] 2007, 86–116).

Through its narrative, *Disco Elysium* advocates for embracing the cycle of destruction and renewal as a path toward personal growth and societal evolution, suggesting that the seeds of the new are always sown in the ruins of the old. Building the matchstick tower is always worth it. As it is falling in love, connecting with others and creating something new—be it a new type of communism, a piece of high-concept art, a unique game or a new nightclub dedicated to anodic music. It does not matter what the result is. With bad faith comes a specific brand of euphoria that connects us to the world and is necessary to forge the path toward authenticity (553–554). Bad faith only becomes harmful when it becomes a compulsion, a crutch, a willingly chosen prison erected and maintained with a sole purpose: to escape the aftermath, postpone the nausea and avoid the confrontation with the absolute grasp of human freedom.

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Section five

# Conclusions

# 14 Playing like

## *Disco Elysium* and the making of IR subjects

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### 14.1 A call to play

All this started with a call for papers. I had not played *Disco Elysium* before receiving an email from our co-editor Vic Castro, and it's fair to say that I would have not written anything about it without that call for papers, even if I had eventually played it. But it is not the invitation as such that turned my attention to the game; rather, it was the manner in which the call hailed those whom it hailed and eventually brought us together in this volume. Two sentences in particular jumped right at me: "it is hard to play [*Disco Elysium*] *as a scholar* without finding things to say about it"; "for the few of you who are *not IR scholars*: you are very welcome, just angle your work in a way that involves politics, and please do *bring the flavour of your own fields*." Fascinating, I thought—not the game, I hadn't played it yet, remember?—but these three ideas of playing as a scholar, of a distinct IR way of looking at a video game, and of a professional field flavoring the way a video game is played, as well as written about.

I'd been thinking these things for years. So after receiving this call there was a part of me that wanted to write this paper twice: once, right then, on the spot, before playing the game, working just with my preconceptions and anticipations of what International Relations scholars would write on occasions such as this. Not because I thought that my fellow IRists—to borrow Gerald Holden's (2003) brilliant and inexplicably overlooked disciplinary trademark—are that predictable. I just wanted to see if my discipline worked in the way I thought it worked. The second writing would have come after I'd played the game and watched and read stuff about it, as I usually do with any game I play (but never write about). I didn't do that for two reasons: first, I thought that the editors may not react too kindly to any argument based on *not* playing the game; and second, because, before I got my quill sharpened and my wits gathered, the editors' more detailed call for contributions to this volume spelled out in detail what "international politics" could mean.

Although only potential, the contrast between those two imaginary versions of this paper still brings to the fore the key question I want to address here: "what does it mean to play a videogame like an IR scholar"? This question has, of course, many corollaries: what is an IR scholar? What is IR? Are there other ways of playing? How many? How are they different? For what, or for whom do the differences matter? Sure, some will say, good questions, but none of the answers are about *Disco Elysium*, and this is a book about *Disco Elysium*. Well, sort of. Neither the question nor its answers are restricted to *Disco Elysium* alone, but I do want to make the case that *Disco Elysium* in particular, combined with the opportunity to write about it, brings to the fore the paradoxical nature of the question posed and, thus, to the paradoxical nature of this book.

My argument will be that there is indeed such a thing as playing like an IRist. Yet the origins of this distinction are not to be found in disciplinarity alone but at its intersection with any particular video game, the activity of playing, the anticipation of writing about a video game, and the entire hypotextuality of gaming for business and for pleasure. The paradox is twofold. First, the *product* of this playing-and-writing—although this sequence is one of the things I want to question—is not as distinct as IRists like to think. When I refer to "product" I have in mind a generic and publicly available making-sense-of rather than the format in which it may be packaged, for example, a Twitch session versus this book versus a piece posted on *Rock Paper Shotgun*. "Other" players may not get there in the same way, but that does not mean that they don't make similar sense of, for example, a game *like Disco Elysium*. Ergo, "we" are special, but we're also not; we think like us, but also like them. As suggested by Jacques Rancière (2006) "they"—that is, whoever does not feel like an IRist but is in the IRist's field of view—are in this sense a constant thorn in the IRist's egomaniacal side. This leads to the obverse of our paradox: the question of what it means to play like an IRist presupposes the possibility that IRists could actually know what it would feel like to play otherwise. I'm sure I'm quoting someone famous when I say that there are very few things I am less sure about. Playing *Disco Elysium* helped confirm that.

## 14.2 The who in the what

Writing for a volume (initially) titled *The International Politics of Disco Elysium* requires three things, which are usually collapsed into two things: knowing about *Disco Elysium* and knowing about international politics. The third, usually implicit requirement, is knowing how to put these two together as an "IR scholar." It is the conjuring of up these kinds of *knowing* that fuels my simultaneous interrogation of *Disco Elysium* and the IR-not IR takes on it.

First things first: do I really know about *Disco Elysium*? I am, I must confess, highly suspicious of my own credentials when it comes to this, despite flaunting them brazenly whenever the occasion presents itself. On what grounds am I, a self-identified, card-carrying, dyed-in-the-wool IRist, qualified to comment on this, or any video game? Superficially, I can claim to know a limited number of things about

*Disco Elysium*. Part of this "knowing" comes from playing the game. I have also done my research; I'm a *professional*, you see. But that's not enough; without either feigning modesty or lionizing gaming audiences, I can easily anticipate that of the millions of people who have played this game, many have played for longer, more acutely perceptive, and more times than me. As illustrated by some excellent long-form reviews of the game, it is also pretty obvious that others have also done their research, arguably better, and for longer than me. So what *do* I know?

Well, one thing I know for sure is that whatever anybody "knows about *Disco Elysium*" is not only about *Disco Elysium*. To know about *Disco Elysium* is to also know, for example, about the existence of video games as a pastime or a type of cultural artifact or a product I can buy—and where to buy—as a present for someone of a particular age or gender or degree of intimacy (and cool). It is also to likely know about role-playing as its genre, about other genres that cut across it or away from it —puzzlers, noir, action—and about the warnings that come with RPGs versus CRPGs versus RTTGs versus and so on. It is to know that it is now possible to play, read about and write about video games as a part of my job, and as a part of other kinds of jobs. And finally, to know about *Disco Elysium* is to know everything I know from playing other games, and everything I know from reading everything I have read—including the fact that this very reference would be identified by Gérard Genette as an instance of architextuality (1997b),[1] and that it is a restatement (*sans* the categorical Marxism) of the "organizational fiction" that introduced Frederic Jameson's approach to hermeneutics as metacommentary (1983, ix–x). I could also frame this reference in terms of the ecology of gaming (Salen 2008) or Foucault's discursive formations, but I *know that I should* argue that Genette's narratological vocabulary seems particularly apposite in this instance, seeing that one of *Disco Elysium*'s unique selling points is its "more than one million words" script and that its storytelling virtues are highlighted by its creators and its reviewers alike. What this means, in essence, is that "I know *Disco Elysium*" includes knowing IR and that, to a considerable extent, I know *Disco Elysium because* I know IR.

Do I know about international politics then? It depends, of course. My job title says I do, but that's not enough to convince everyone, for example, my parents, that I know international politics better than them. My ability to sort and file the themes circulated in the editors' book proposal suggests my familiarity with the diversity that now characterizes the disciplinary definition of international politics, and although this is not the place to survey the ever-growing literature contesting what lies at the heart of IR as a discipline, it's pretty clear that that too is still not enough to convince everyone in IR of my proficiency in the real stuff, the stuff that really matters. As I have written elsewhere, this is one of the reasons why a significant part of aesthetic IR still operates within the war-violence-states boundaries of our discipline (Ciută 2016, 2024). Which is not to say that we can proceed to write about *Disco Elysium* as/and international politics without imagining some kind of ground under our feet—isn't this the purpose of our book?—but, on the contrary, to point out that it is impossible to engage with the *Disco Elysium*, the world, my parents, *without* a construct of international politics. The real question, then, is not whether I

"know about international politics" but concerns the relationship between what *Disco Elysium* tells me, and what I already know, which is the fundamental question of interpretation (e.g., Ricœur 1974), and, I will argue, of this volume. Does *Disco Elysium* tell me—and all the other players—something about international politics, which is to say, in a shape that *it* defines as "international politics," or is it I who see what I already know about international politics in *Disco Elysium*? Once again—good question, but more on the answer later.

So is *Disco Elysium* a game *about* international politics? On surface—that is, according to a particular vernacular or disciplinary construction of that ground under our feet—*Disco Elysium* is not about international politics at all: its plot is quintessentially local, its scale decidedly claustrophobic, its central character uber-parochial, and even its conclusion, femto-political in its consequences. Sure, its events take place against a broader international landscape, and there are "obvious" traces of things international throughout the game, including in its long denouement—but then, *my discipline taught me*, everything does, the multiple histories of the international scar whichever worlds are made of it. It starts to feel like the question is rigged, since the very existence of this volume demonstrates, and is meant to demonstrate, that *Disco Elysium* is fodder for the IR industry. As is by now well established across literary, cultural, video game studies, and (to some extent) aesthetic IR, "determining the status of a text is not the business of the text, but of the reader, or the critic, or the public" (Genette 1997b, 4). The distinctions that separate readers from critics from publics are hardly unproblematic, but at the very least this entitles IRists to their share of "the site of a struggle for meaning" which a video game is, to paraphrase John Fiske (2001, 93). In this sense, the fact that IRists see international politics in *Disco Elysium* says more about IRists and their struggles than about the game—but this is neither an uncontroversial nor insignificant theme, so I will return to it too in more detail later.

For now, let me come at this differently: none of the interviews, reviews, playthroughs and how-tos I managed to consume (which granted, judging by size of the subreddit, is not that many) mention that this is a video game *about* international politics. Even the most superficial reader-response hermeneutics will notice that *Disco Elysium*'s paratexts and metatexts (Genette 1997a, 4) operate in a different plane. IGN (2021) mentions, for example, politics, political theory, existential theory and sociopolitical history in its review of the game, and there are countless references to its ideology and philosophy, but neither international politics nor IR theory makes an appearance. Sure, *I* could argue that some of these metatexts see *Disco Elysium* as a metaphor of end of 20th-century international politics, rather than as a game about it, and *I* could, for example, interpret the description of Revachol in the long-form video review by Skill Up as a synecdoche of the international: "a strange polyglot of different races, political ideologies, identities, age groups, social groups, class, castes and cultures ... as if too much difference was piled on too high on too small a square mileage" (Skill Up 2019, 9:20). I could, but would that not just be an IRist seeing IR everywhere, and assuming that nobody else does?

So how come IRists see so much, and so many kinds of international politics in *Disco Elysium*? Beyond the immediate "because everything is international/politics" answer, maybe there is something peculiar about this game. While playing and looking at others play, the game offered me a clue in the shape of a word: *theory*, of the infamous "Advanced Race *Theory*" kind. And hot damn, if there isn't an absolutely gargantuan amount of theory in *Disco Elysium*. Names could be named, but we'd be here the proverbial whole day, plus everyone who has said anything about this game has named at least Marx. The thing is, though, with the exception of A.R.T., this theory never comes at the player in the shape of "theory." Its vernacular is just that: a vernacular, often similar in constitution and content to the theoretical vernaculars that swirl copiously in incessant public commentary and the affective mediation of social media platforms this side of Revachol. Here as well as there, micro-events are always felt as just micro-events, although they are narrated against grand philosophical lines. Each click in the skills menu or the dialogue interface, each historical and ideological signpost, they only, somehow, resound conceptually and theoretically. Yet almost every character in the game talks, alludes to, *knows*, what I could easily recognize as (IR) "theory." In the intimacy of conversation with characters I liked, or in the terror of exposition from characters I didn't, I always heard IR.

Is this my, or is it *Disco Elysium*'s doing? It is tempting to put this down to theoretical expertise because the very idea of expertise is so gratifying. As put by Astrid Johnson in a video review of the game, "*Disco Elysium* can be aggressively esoteric and incomprehensibly clever at times. It's deep ... and I adore that to bits *because it scratches my pretentious wanky critic itch*" (Rock Paper Shotgun 2019, 1:20, emphasis added). Kudos for the honesty—although it is open to debate how much of this honesty is the product of past encounters with and anticipation of the metatext's metatexts, that is, what is known in YouTube lingo as "the comments down below"—but as much as I think that pretentious-slash-wanky fits perfectly the figure of the IRist, this only compounds the problem.

"Believe it or not," says lead designer Robert Kurvitz, "we are not elitists. All we've ever wanted to do is a mass product, for mass entertainment" (Gamespot 2020, 7:50). So that's the temptation of elitist reading shot right in the face by the game's designers. True, it is possible that this is only marketing speak, designed to protect sales by playing down potential representations of the game as some kind of esoterica—although experience shows that players are quite fond of cabalistic readings, and that these tend to help, rather than hurt sales. Yet this pre-emption of the notion of a privileged access to the meaning of the game is in tune with the game. I mean, A.R.T. is there for everyone to read and "excel" at; when the characters of *Disco Elysium* speak as if in philosophy and all kinds of theory, players have no choice but reckon with that knowledge and, as a result, with their own. In essence, *Disco Elysium* tells its players: *you all know this*. Ergo, whatever the IRist understands is meant for everybody to understand.

So how come a video game assumes that its players will "know" the unmistakably theoretical content it offers to all, not just to those players who also happen to be

IRists? By now it is rather commonplace to notice that theory of all kinds can be encountered in popular culture (e.g., Atia and Houlden 2019; Barron 2013; Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017; Hollows and Moseley 2006; in IR, see, for example, Rowley and Weldes 2012). But there is a difference between the characters in a video game "knowing" theory—which reflects the designers' input—and assuming that a video game's general audience "knows" theory (e.g., Hills 2002; McLaughlin 1996; Rancière 2006; Sedgwick 2003; Torner 2018). One can only conclude that, in addition to a journey through a rich conceptual-theoretical-ideological landscape, *Disco Elysium* also offers its players a meta-theory: *everybody knows theory*.

Now, whether everybody who plays this game really does know either all these theories or what *Disco Elysium* says about them, I cannot know. I am, to quote Ricœur and channel some Gadamer on the way, merely letting the game and "its world enlarge the horizon of my own self-understanding" (Ricœur 1974, 107). But sitting here surrounded by clips from YouTube commentary, snippets of interviews, coffee, biscuits and notes from my own playing sessions, all I see is transtextuality, written in whatever the theory equivalent of coding software is: *Disco Elysium* makes a theoretical argument about the relationship between itself and those theories that make an identical argument about the relationship between themselves and cultural artefacts like *Disco Elysium*. It's as if "the game"—an ambiguous phrase I use deliberately for the moment—"doesn't want to draw much ontological distinction between academic theory and everyday theory; and ... has a lot of concern for the quality of other people's and one's own practices of knowing and experiencing" (Sedgwick 2003, 145).

At this point, it seems that the whole "playing like an IR scholar" theme is thoroughly dead, finito, kaputt—and it is, if IR's engagement with popular culture in general and video games in particular is understood as a revelatory practice. During repeated encounters with various embodiments of ideological critique throughout the game, a line from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick kept playing in my head: "What price now the cultural critics' hard-won skill at making visible, behind permissive appearances, the hidden traces of oppression and persecution?" (Sedgwick 2003, 141). *Disco Elysium*'s creators seem to have gone out of their way to deny us the pleasure "of making visible the work of so many hitherto invisible hands" (Fish 2004, 377). But I refuse to despair, for I have one last roll of the dice in my quest to still find meaning in playing like an IRist: emphasize the visible rather than the concealed, as Elisabeth Anker and Rita Felski suggest (2017, 16). And what a fitting strategy this is, seeing that *Disco Elysium* also makes its dice rolls visible, rather than concealed.

## 14.3 Discipline and play

By now it should be obvious that many of the thoughts I formulated earlier do not depend on playing *Disco Elysium*, and indeed, I have been thinking them for quite a while now. Playing the game did not change much—or at least, it did not change

*those* thoughts. Does it mean, as Gerald Holden (2003, 2006) argued in what is still the sharpest critique of aesthetic IR, that I am only using *Disco Elysium* to "bolster the views" I already hold about international politics, IR and everything else. In a sense —the sense that each encounter with a text is pre-mediated—Holden is right, but we have known this in the social sciences at least since Gadamer. If so, does this confirm that there is no difference between IR/non-IR/non-academic encounters with a text? To put it differently: where do these views and preferences that IRists hold (and seek to bolster) come from? Does being-in-IR make any difference to which views are bolstered? Or, as asked by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in a once again inspired formulation: "*what does knowledge do*—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows?" (2003, 124, emphasis added).

When Daniel Warnotte coined the term *déformation professionnelle* (professional deformation), he did not have IR in mind—neither did John Dewey's "occupational psychosis" nor Thorstein Veblen's "trained incapacity," although both were concerned with the effects of training in the educational, academic-disciplinary sense. Yet by now most IRists will recognize the idea of a co-constitutive and institutionalized relationship between specific practices, interests and ways of thinking as an ingredient of many a varied perspectives in the social sciences, including discourse, identity, frame, queer or actor-network theory, to name but very few of those already present in IR. So what's really baking my noodle—to borrow a phrase from the Oracle in The Matrix—comes from taking Sedgwick's question literally: what does knowledge of IR do to me?

The constitution of the seeing subject (e.g., Crary 1990)—and in this case, the playing subject—is therefore coterminous with the constitution of a disciplinary subject. This is a very broad topic that I attempt to engage in more detail elsewhere, but for the moment I will just propose the notion that, as much as being an IRist is a matter of self-identification, it also presupposes a particular kind of engagement with particular kinds of knowledge that are at work in swirly, labyrinthine kinds of ways. I took the editors' call as an invocation of precisely such disciplinarily and professionally constituted subject: "it is hard to play [*Disco Elysium*] *as a scholar* without finding things to say about it." If they meant "I played this game and I saw IR everywhere," then of course I did. I mean, what's a brother to do, I am a trained IR professional and no *déformation professionnelle* is alien to me. But I also hinted at this when I mentioned what "my discipline taught me." Feminism may have been the first to make this explicit (hooks 1993), but as Amanda Anderson points out, "intellectual and aesthetic postures are always also lived practices" (2006, 7). I don't know if I really embrace any IR theory as a way of living (3), but I know that I cannot un-know IR, so is it possible at all to think/consume/play in a way that is not IR-mediated? I'm sure I am not only speaking for myself when I say that I'm incapable of playing a video game or watching a movie without constantly seeing IR—no matter how fleeting, ironic or even reluctant this seeing may be. The concepts, schemes, taboos and echoes of my discipline constantly scroll on my screen like my

own kind of matrix code. There was never any chance of me playing *Disco Elysium* as if I'm not an IRist; I don't even know what that would mean.

I thus have no choice but return to the question of disciplinary specificity, which has haunted aesthetic IR from its very beginning. Most often, the answer to this question remains quintessentially intra-disciplinary: the study of video games, for example, belongs in IR if the boundaries of IR are redrawn in a particular way. Very little has been said about what is distinctive about the IR study of video games—in contrast to, for example, the study of video games in video game studies or in contrast to other, non-academic forms of study.[2] It's not the professional outlook or output: witness the video games journalists, the content creators on YouTube or Twitch, or even the many game designers who reflect professionally on all aspects of game design and content. All are engaged with video games as part of their profession. It's not the depth: witness the detailed theory crafting, the playthroughs and tutorials, the Reddit rabbit holes—all of which display a knowledge of the game that often far surpasses that accumulated/displayed by the IRist (Hills 2002; Torner 2018). It's not even the questions: if everybody knows that *Disco Elysium* is a metaphor of, say, coloniality (but take your pick), if intersectionality is as at home on Twitter as it is in a university press, and if *Matrix Resurrections* engages in the kind of self-referentiality that draws the characters, filmmakers, historical audience and scene-viewers into a singular blended subject who wonders about the meaning of the movie, and thus of the act of spectating it—then in what sense are "our" questions ours?

While it is therefore far from uncommon for "other" players to read international/politics in video games or to recognize in the rules of a game a coherent way of thinking about international politics that could be mapped onto disciplinary-theoretical patterns, what IRists have no choice but do is see these *as IR*. Sometimes this seeing becomes the purpose of playing, as Holden suggested, and it totally was in my case this time, but this isn't a necessity. So rather than claim to reveal some presumably hidden features of the game/gameplay that fit the IR conceptual, theoretical or paradigmatic grid, my own reflection on video games and international politics, whether published or not, must start with the recognition that seeing IR is the defining feature of my play. Only in this way *Disco Elysium* can be at the same time not elitist, and full of the "IR theory" I am incapable of not seeing in it.

Once again, we are treading a familiar path. Any theory, IR theory included, is "among other things, a mode of selective scanning and amplification," argued Sedgwick (2003, 135). So on the one hand, I could follow Catherine Bell's analysis of ritual theory and argue that seeing international politics/IR in a video game is yet another instance of the familiar academic practice of constituting "an object of analysis in such a way as to mandate a particular method, expertise, and way of knowing" (Bell 1992, xiv–xv). To see IR is therefore a way of legitimating IR as a way of seeing, not only as something that is seen. This isn't to propose anything as trivial as "my IR." "IR" and "IR scholars" are historically constituted categories, so whatever IR I see in a video game is this confluence of training, institutional place,

social time, ritual dexterity, career choices, needs, wants, hurts, successes and cynicisms, all of which converge into this particular playing/IR subject. (Translation: we have all read Butler, Giddens and Bourdieu.) In the sense I described earlier, then, IR is not really something to be revealed but something that is somehow conjured up in front of our eyes. When IRists see IR/ir in a video game, they at the same time make the video game into IR, make IR into something that can be seen in a video game, and make themselves into the kind of people that can legitimately write about IR and video games.

If this *making into* sounds familiar to any IRist reading this page, it's because you're a particular kind of IRist—the kind who hears echoes of Foucault everywhere. But in echoing Foucault's reference to how we "constitute ourselves and [...] recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying" (Foucault 1997, 315), Ian Hacking emphasized that "in thinking of constituting ourselves, we should think of constituting *as* so and so" (Hacking 2002, 2, original emphasis). Questions, so many questions: for example, is this constituting ourselves *as* IRists trainable, as academic disciplinarity is? Is it a making that distorts—or better said, is it a making that distorts differently from other kinds of such makings? What is the difference between IRists seeing IR in *Disco Elysium* and thus confirming themselves into IRdom, professional writers streaming a *Disco Elysium* playthrough as part of their academic activity focused on creative writing (Neophyte Studios 2020), and the YouTube channel Epoch Philosophy—"dedicated to making the most digestible, easy-to-understand, entertaining, yet, not watered down videos on theory and continental philosophy" (Epoch Philosophy 2022)—seeing Lacan and Žižek all over *Disco Elysium* and thus making the channel what it is, a philosophy channel?

As professionals of knowledge and education, IRists are well aware of "the 'clinical gaze' as a modern technology of perception that shapes the very objects it claims to *interrogate or discover*" (Anker and Felski 2017, 5, emphasis added), but when it comes to popular culture and video games, seemingly much less inclined to ponder on their own constitution as the interrogating or discovering subject (but see Carver 2010). An interesting turn of phrase though: interrogate or discover. Sounds like a job for a detective.

## 14.4 Knowing/playing: the limit in excess

So here we are, as if by necessity, back at *Disco Elysium*. Seen like this, played like this, *Disco Elysium* is indeed special. But not because IRists see IR in it—by now it should be clear that there is nothing special about that—and not only because playing it makes IRists realize their IR-ness. Rather, *Disco Elysium* is special because through its genre-specific mechanics, and a fair bit of extra-diegetic help, it deals explicitly with the idea of "playing like." To a significant extent, this idea maps very well on the genre of *Disco Elysium*, widely celebrated already for its innovative approach to CRPGs. The concept seems simple enough: play the role of a detective as you want. Through its skill system, a CRPG builds a degree of variation in the construction of the character, which is then translated, in principle at least, into a

degree of variation at the level of gameplay. If you're a scholar, or Ranciére's woodworker, or an actual detective, bring it on, express yourself, put it to work (or the opposite) in building the character you want and playing like you like to play.

From the perspective of (a kind of) IR, it sounds like RPGs are in essence historical ontologies, which are, as Hacking argued, "not so much about the formation of character as about the space of possibilities for character formation that surround a person, and create the potentials for 'individual experience' " (2002, 23). "Character," "individual experience," "possibility spaces"—hardly more apposite terminology in the context of examining an RPG. Conversely, from the perspective of video game studies, it would be possible to examine the idea of playing like an IRist in the context of the typology of players (e.g., Bartle 1995), player mentality (e.g., Kallio, Mäyrä, and Kaipainen 2011), or that of the relationship between character and player (e.g., Bowman and Schrier 2018). Those are not angles I am qualified to explore, although I can anticipate some knowing tut-tutting from the RPG crowd when I confess that at the start of my first playthrough of *Disco Elysium* I poured every single experience point into "Conceptualization." I guess that's as blatant a case of pawning[3] and steering[4] as you'll find, but seriously, I had no choice, *Begriffsgeschichte* is listed in my CV.

Yes, this is but one random example, but there's lot happening in it. For one, that turned out to be a dramatically suboptimal choice that I made only because I am an IRist, and, inevitably although not necessarily deliberately because I knew I was going to write about this game. At least—but I would argue, not just—in this case, the usual play-then-write sequence completely fell apart, my disciplinary subject position messing with me before I even got to make an ×◯ △. But the thing is, "the game" knows this. You don't need me to tell you that there is simply no way of playing *Disco Elysium* without your knowledge messing with you because *Disco Elysium* tells you, nay *warns* you of this right from the start. Here's how RagnarRox put it in a YouTube review, citing liberally from the game's character menu:

> Just as you'd expect, in *Disco Elysium* you also gain XP over time, and increase your skills gradually... . But another stroke of genius, storytelling-wise, is that—yes, every skill gets nominally better the more points you get into it, but every single skill can also become *too strong*... . [The] Mazovian socio-economics, the game universe's equivalent of Marxism, will make all left-wing dialogue options reward you with XP. But you also lose some authority for being a downtrodden inva-communist and your visual calculus skill suffers because you see <<Reaction! Reaction everywhere!>>.
>
> (2019, 22:09-fwd)

In other words, *Disco Elysium* tells all players that their character (i.e., their version of Harry) "thinks" and "interacts" with the world as a result of what the character slowly comes to know about the world, and about himself; that what the character knows, the character is; and that knowledge, especially *expert* knowledge,

can be the character's undoing. Yet this being an RPG, every version of the character is built by the player, so this is in effect a warning for the players that they too make whatever choices they make as a result of what they know and who they are. Trained incapacity, it turns out, is not just inevitable; it is the defining condition of both existing in Revachol and playing *Disco Elysium*. So much so that at the start of my second playthrough I was already entertaining the idea that the skill set "Conceptualization" was only called so, and only existed in the game, because the designers knew it would be my intellectual catnip.

I'm not really suggesting that the people at ZA/UM had IR academics from London in mind when they designed *Disco Elysium* (but then, you know ...). What I am suggesting is that there is evidence that *Disco Elysium* plays with the same paradoxical question I started this chapter with: what does it mean to play like, for example, an IR scholar or "*Dios mio*! A LIBERAL!." To an extent, all RPGs do this. A skill tree is meant to guide *all* players in the creation of *all* possible characters, no matter what kind of knowledge is brought to the game, or sought in it. Yet *each* player chooses according to this bounded "whatever" they bring to the game or seek in it. In *Disco Elysium*, one of the ways in which this balance between "all" and "each" is expressed is by pointing out the self-inflicted limitation latent in the excess of certainty that drives any particular choice. The tragedy of a subject unleashed yet at the same time bound by their skill-knowledge-worldview is thus by design universal and inevitably liminal.

There is, in other words, an explicit hermeneutics in *Disco Elysium* and its paratexts. "Every morning, you discover yourself" was how Robert Kurvitz described the way amnesia worked as *Disco Elysium*'s (and more generally an RPG) engine (Steam 2021, 40:45). The ambiguity of the *self* invoked—is it the character, is it the player, is it every one of us?—may have been deliberate, or may not, and so may have been that sense of *discovery*, rather than remembrance. But there is an unmistakably Proustian whiff about his description of game design: readers "would not according to me be my readers, but the real readers of themselves ... [My book] enabled them to read what lay within themselves" (Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, cited in Ricœur 1991, 198).

Our paradox has finally surfaced: "playing like an IR scholar" is *like* this, but cannot be *about* this. Sure, whatever evidence I have provided to make my case is obviously curated by my epistemological bent—I am prejudiced, Gadamer may say, by my attachment to Gadamer's concept of prejudice. But you don't need to be an inveterate hermeneuticist to think that a role-playing game necessarily involves at least a degree of interpretation and that this very thing requires a balance to be struck between games needing rules and players needing to play their own way. You also don't need to be an IRist for that. You *do* need to be an IRist for that third dimension I mentioned right at the start: putting "that" and IR together, which is exactly what makes you an IRist and exactly what holds IR together (today). So whenever IRists write about video games, their conclusion is preordained—not in the bolsterist sense denounced by Holden but in a disciplinary sense: the video game *must* be about IR. If IRists ask, as video game designer Allan Millard (2022) did in his

review of the game, "What was *Disco Elysium* actually about?," their answer is, will and must always be "it is about international relations" before their fingers ever hit the keyboard, and even before their hands grab the controller. If it isn't, that's fine, but it likely means they do not see themselves as IRists; we know that much from the call for papers for this volume.

Even if you haven't seen his video, it's a safe bet that Millard's answer was not "*Disco Elysium* is about IRists musing about their discipline," and it's hard to fault him for that. But that doesn't mean that there isn't another version of discipline and play at work in his review, which he confessed to getting through only at the fourth attempt. My friend, let's call him The Geographer, hasn't played *Disco Elysium* yet. He is as committed to his Geographer badge as I am to mine, so we regularly have to laugh away our nearly identical research profiles by pointing out that neither of our disciplines is "very good at excluding things from itself" (Abbott 2001, 5). Geographers, just like IRists, apply their discipline "to just about everything [they] can lay [their] hands on, which, as [they are] no respecter[s] of property rights, is a very great deal," to use Clifford Geertz's caustically entertaining description of the sociology of Erving Goffman (Geertz 1980, 170). But if The Geographer did play *Disco Elysium*, I would fully expect him to see <<Space! Space everywhere!>> and die on that hill, just as I did on mine. And he'd be also right.

As for myself, playing *Disco Elysium* as an IRist "brought me" to two conclusions: (1) go ahead and play like an IRist, you have no choice but that's alright; (2) IRists are not that different, because while they may have their own "schemes, feints, and blind spots" (Bell 1992, 9), they can neither claim monopoly over the knowledges in-and-of the world, professional expertise and ideological excess nor exclude themselves from their effects.

## 14.5 IR where we most expect it

Gérard Genette used this example to illustrate the significance of paratexts: "[H]ow would we read Joyce's *Ulysses* if it were not entitled *Ulysses*?" (1997b, 2). It is a brilliant example of a question that can make one come up with a million things to say, except an actual answer. In many ways, it is the same kind of paradoxical question I have tried to address in this chapter: How would I *play Disco Elysium* if I didn't know from the start that this is a game about which one can write in IR? How would I play *Disco Elysium* if I didn't *know* IR? How would I *write* about it if I didn't know IR?

"For a long time," a voice soothes in my ears when I listen to Joe Acheson's *Hidden Orchestra Archipelago Mixtape*, "years even, it seemed to me I had nothing to put into what I wrote. And nor had I. I did not yet appreciate that you do not put yourself into what you write, you find yourself there." This will always be music rather than literature to me, even though I now know that these words are not written or voiced by jazzist Joe Acheson but are a sample of playwright and author Alan Bennett reading his own "Staring Out of the Window" short story in a radio show. This is more than a trivial anecdote: it is I think significant that the best approximation of

an answer to the question "what does it mean to play like an IR scholar?" comes in this transmediatic-transtextual shape: to play-and-write like an IR scholar is to find ourselves there *as IR scholars*.

Is that it, then? Have we all been playing *Disco Elysium* as IRists only to end up with Proust or recycling some well-worn theory of identity? Yes and no. Yes, because as I argued earlier there is a sense of inevitability about IRists seeing IR (the kind of IR that includes identity theories) on every screen their gaze happens upon. No, because although self-confirmation is inherent in any engagement with culture or life, this is neither the explicit purpose of playing nor its sole outcome. With this in mind, the conclusions I can draw from playing *Disco Elysium* as an IR scholar can only be of the meta-disciplinary kind. If *Disco Elysium* is to be more than just coin for the IR publication jukebox, my writing about it can no longer result in the conclusion that popular culture and video games are relevant for IR. That battle has already been won. My seeing anything in *Disco Elysium* does not add much *to IR*. Whenever I argue that "the game says-or-does-this" I am, *pace* Genette, but a self-appointed and disciplinarily inflected reader, lost—and always in danger of not being aware of just how lost—in a sea of blended readers, critics, audiences. So instead, *Disco Elysium*, and more generally every instance of writing-and-playing-and-writing video games, can be taken as an opportunity to ask the still unanswered questions of aesthetic IR.

The first is: what *else* is different about the IR take on *Disco Elysium*? "Nothing" may sound like an indictment and could well draw some stern protestations (see, e.g., Dyvik, Selby, and Wilkinson 2017, 8–9; Booth 2017). But this remains a challenge, the more so the better IR gets at playing and thinking about video games. This volume brims with insight produced in the name of IR, while reaching way out in terms of both theoretical infrastructure and audience. Yet even though the quickest glance at studies of video games outside IR will show significant thematic similarities, I don't get the sense that our collective purpose was to drive a monster truck through the barriers of disciplinarity. Our book, all work in aesthetic IR and the work on video games in so many other disciplines—all suggest that many IRists are not quite ready to give up on IR, and others on their own disciplinary positions (Abbott 2001, 151). It doesn't take playing *Disco Elysium* to fathom that IR still needs an identity, but that's where we end up anyway.

So then the second question, which I have formulated in the past, is in essence a way of answering the first one: rather than "what does IR say about *Disco Elysium*?," ask "what does it say about IR?" From that vantage point, the significance of *Disco Elysium* for IR is pretty much encapsulated in its opening seconds: you gotta figure out who you are, but know that what you think you know best can be your undoing. Skeptics may see such meta-disciplinary concerns as barely camouflaged narcissism that distracts from "the great questions of the day"—which tellingly, is as much a quote from Otto von Bismarck as it is from *Civilization V*. Rubbish. IR is clearly still trying to work out its historical constitution as a way of knowing, seeing and being, and the consequences this has had, and has, on its writing about its others. On available evidence, IRists need all the help they can get to understand what they're doing, so *Disco Elysium*—thank you for your help.

## Notes

1. Genette defined architextuality as "the relationship of inclusion linking each text to the various kinds of discourse of which it is a representative" (1997b, xix) ⏎
2. This is but an isolated example, but I still think it is telling that a relatively recent volume dedicated to the study of RPGs has a section dedicated to "Disciplinary Perspectives" that does not include IR (or political science) and a section on "Interdisciplinary Issues" that does not include the international/global as a distinct issue pertinent to the study of RPGs (Zagal and Deterding 2018). ⏎
3. "Pawn" is a stance that describes situations when "a player is blatantly using the character to fulfill her own desires as a player" (Torner 2018, 205). ⏎
4. Montola, Stenros and Saita define steering as "actions intended to guide the character to a specific effect for reasons that exist outside of the character's conception of the world" (2015, 109). ⏎

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# Afterword

## Calling IR to the disco floor

*Nick Robinson*

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### Introduction

In 1993, the Le Diberder brothers' book *Qui a peur des jeux vidéo?* declared video games the 10th art form—"a provocative proclamation for the time" (Wolf and Perron 2003, 8). Such a claim was subsequently and emphatically upheld by the French Minister of Culture in 2006, who declared video games a "form of artistic expression," granting them tax breaks (NY Times, 06/11/2006). While it may appear incongruous to even question the artistic value of games over thirty years on, what is striking is that they still struggle for relative legitimacy and are seldom afforded the same standing as other art forms.

Released in 2019, with millions of unit sales, *Disco Elysium* has attracted near-universal critical acclaim, centered not only on its qualities as a game but also on its capacity to move players emotionally and to provoke thinking. The sheer scale of intellectual debate the game has engendered among both scholars (e.g., Bodi and Thon 2020) and the public (see, for example, the vast array of material on YouTube (e.g., Architect of Games 2022) provides an important indication of its value as a thought-provoking work of art.

The contributors to this volume make a further, and highly compelling case, that *Disco Elysium* is a game which is worthy of sustained debate. The book aims to use the game "as a political text that provides original arguments on a wide range of issues within world politics" (Introduction, 3) and, in particular, to demonstrate its value for "opening new interpretive possibilities for what is often taken for granted in traditional understandings of world politics" (Introduction, 3). These are highly valuable aims, both to show how games can provoke thinking and to demonstrate their broader value to IR scholars.

Given the broad nature of IR as a discipline, the authors' contributions are also appropriately ambitious: with chapters that examine how *Disco Elysium* engages with democracy, capitalism, power, imperialism and political subjectivity to name but five. In these areas—and others besides—they have compellingly delivered in

demonstrating how *Disco Elysium* can provoke and invoke thinking about our understanding of world politics.

At the time of writing in 2024, however, the making of the game has become embroiled in controversies centered on allegations of bullying and coercive control, excessive working hours, precarious labor (senior developers were dismissed with no apparent redress), and intellectual property rights (for example in relation to contestation over who wrote elements of the dialogue and/or was integral to designing core elements of the game) (People Make Games 2023). It is important to note that most of these essays were being drafted and completed before this controversy unfolded and as such those compiling them were untouched by it. Yet it is worth acknowledging that the controversy, the implications of which I touch on further later, may well color how we read *Disco Elysium now*, may profoundly shape how it is discussed and debated going forward, and may well shape both how future scholarship engages with this game (i.e., the types of questions that are asked of it) and whether they engage with it at all (i.e., the game may be effectively cancelled, particularly by those predisposed to its leftist politics).

In reflecting on the contribution which this book has made—and by way of offering an afterword—this chapter reflects on that contribution alongside the literature on popular culture and world politics; demonstrates the added value that comes from reading *Disco Elysium* to both see emerging trends within world politics (what I elsewhere term "theory capturing work") and to think anew about world politics and reveal the foundations upon which theory is based (what I elsewhere term "foundation revealing work" (Robinson 2015)); reflects on methods to tease out the book's contribution in terms of how to read complex games such as this for IR theorizing, and suggests some potential next steps—building on the important work offered by the authors.

## An IR of *Disco Elysium*

### *Frameworks*

The ways in which popular culture and world politics intersect are vast. Scholars have developed a number of highly useful typologies that seek to provide indications of the scope of such interactions. For example, Weldes and Rowley (2015) identify five (non-exhaustive) relationships between the two phenomena: "state uses of popular culture" (e.g., state-generated propaganda such as pro-war posters and films); "the global political economy and/of popular culture" (e.g., the circulation, distribution, licensing and consumption of Disney movies); "global flows [that] are cultural and political" (e.g., the way in which music morphs, flows and is absorbed and/or is rejected in different contexts); "representations, texts and intertexts" (e.g., how different cultural and racial groups are represented in films and video games), and "the politics of cultural consumption and cultural practices" (e.g., how audiences understand meaning within popular culture) (see also Neumann and Nexon 2006). As Weldes (1999, 122) had earlier argued, it is unrealistic for a

researcher to cover all of these themes—in part "for reasons of space" but also due to variations in research questions, methodological frameworks and metatheoretical assumptions.

All of the existing frameworks of popular culture and world politics (PCWP) emphasize the value of reading artefacts of popular culture to inform our understanding of world politics. This book shares this desire, with all chapters except one of the chapters offering a critically informed engagement with the game driven by IR theory. What is crucial, therefore, is whether or not anything distinctive emerges from an IR perspective on *Disco Elysium*? And whether or not *Disco Elysium* offers unique insights into our understanding of world politics? The answer to both questions is emphatically ... yes.

## *Reading Disco Elysium—considering methodology*

The book's contributors read *Disco Elysium* either through existing IR theories or by seeking to explore how the game can be used to invoke or provoke thinking in relation to existing conceptual and theoretical understanding. As one of the contributors, Lacombe-Kishibe puts it:

> By exploring both the game world and the psychodrama of the main character, players get the opportunity to ask questions about how the misery they witness in the characters around them are contextualized by the broader political conditions they live in, and ask questions about what an appropriate reaction to those conditions in their own behaviour might be.
>
> (chapter by Lacombe-Kishibe, 134)

This insight can be applied to all of the chapters, emphasizing the way that *Disco Elysium* has been actively used by the player-contributors to ask questions of the social and political world and demonstrating that it is highly valuable for IR scholarship. Many of the chapters engage with using "popular culture as mirror" (to use Neumann and Nexon's terminology), by which they mean that the reading of the game can be used to help us to see things which are unfolding in world politics. Sometimes what is shown is clear and widely appreciated by the public at large, but there are also occasions in which popular culture can show us things which may not be immediately apparent or which may be actively occluded. At a foundational level, using "popular culture as mirror" can help us gain understanding of theories of world politics—useful for teaching as IR concepts or theories are mapped onto narrative and actions within the game (e.g., Drezner 2011 on using Zombies to explain IR theory). But also, *Disco Elysium* can be used by players who are seeking to explore parallels between events within the game and unfolding events within world politics such as rising extremism and the crisis of capitalism. The game—as these contributions make clear—actively mounts a critique of many aspects of contemporary world politics, such as Estonia's role in the world, the nature of contemporary policing and security policy, and the politics of memory and

forgetting. Thus, aside from its utility in shining light on world politics, it also offers an active form of intervention, with positive implications for critical citizenship. *Disco Elysium* is certainly not a game that can be accused of suppressing the thinking of its players—quite the contrary, it requires considered and active decision taking to succeed.

Yet reading a game doesn't just stop at showing us trends in world politics or helping us to understand theories about world politics (theory capturing work), it can also be invaluable to help us think anew about the foundations of our theoretical understanding and/or to rupture those very foundations and what is often taken as "common sense" in relation to the world around us. Cindy Weber's (2021) landmark contribution uses films to invoke and provoke thinking about foundational texts in IR (what I elsewhere term a "foundational revealing" use of video games (Robinson 2015)). Contributors within this book do similar work, demonstrating how the game can be used to help us see gaps in theoretical understanding and to help us think anew about, for example, capitalism (e.g., Kiersey and Vasquez in relation to Fisher's critique of capitalist realism); the location of sovereignty (e.g., Gilley's discussion of how, among other things, material geographical constraints can constrain liberal interventionism); and the role of norms and normative power in the construction of European identity (e.g., Rantanen's discussion of Estonia's experience of liminality and voicelessness in its experience of accession to the European Union).

This is not a straightforward task. As all of the contributors make clear, *Disco Elysium* is a complex game in which the player has latitude to make multiple choices. The game also responds to the player's choices in highly contingent ways. At a purely practical level, this poses many problems/challenges. The most obvious of these is that other players/readers may have had very different experiences of the game to the ones offered by the author of a particular chapter. This both opens up exciting possibilities for thinking about IR but also poses significant methods-oriented challenges: others may not be able to replicate the approach of one of the authors or, more importantly, may not be in a position to understand how the author secured the experience that they did.

Popular culture is replete with calls to treat polysemy seriously (Schulzke 2017) and to embrace the contestable and ambitious possibilities for reading games in multiple ways (Jarvis and Robinson 2019, 197). What is particularly striking in the case of *Disco Elysium* is not only the rich array of alternative possible thinking that is provoked by the chapters and the experiences of the authors within their gameplay but also the opportunities that the game offers for thinking anew in relation to IR. The game is thus not only a polysemic text par excellence because it can be played, experienced and hence interpreted in multiple ways, but it is also a polysemic text par excellence because through doing this it allows for multiple ways of thinking theoretically.

## *Reading Disco Elysium: disco as narrative, film or game?*

There is a deep-seated historical debate centered on the foundational role that specific disciplines (and their associated methods) should play in our engagements with games. Commonly, this debate is demarcated between narrative scholars (who emphasize a game's storying), film studies traditions (that emphasize the game's cinematic qualities) and what can be loosely termed game studies (emphasizing the actions a player can take), with all of these approaches having much to offer (on this debate see Egenfeldt-Nielson, Smith, and Tosca 2020, 224–33). While it is increasingly acknowledged that the complexity of games requires consideration of all three (Frasca 2003 for a review), I demarcate them here to aid orientation and to tease out the approaches taken by the contributors.

The first brings together insights informed by literature to privilege stories, characterization and the journey characters undertake to create a sequence of events that combine to create narratives (Egenfeldt-Nielson, Smith, and Tosca 2020, 199–205). *Disco Elysium* offers rich narrative possibilities: the central character undertakes a complex journey; the player has significant capacity to shape events through the choices that they make, and the array of dialogue within the game is extraordinary.

Of course, players also tell stories about the narrative they have experienced and enjoyed. This is a complex game, and as the contributors make abundantly clear, the narrative is far from fixed, which (as noted earlier) poses important challenges for scholarship. Not all of these contributors will have had the same experience, while one of them actively sought to play the game in a particular way in which they "molded" their character "to the game's coding of fascism" (chapter by Kolehmainen, 175). So what we have here—in part—are contributions that reflect (via their own experience of the game) the authors' own personal narratives on the insights that they have gained from play.

The second tradition engages with games in relation to their cinematic qualities. Such approaches examine camera framing, use of sound, intertexts, mise-en-scène and so on. to consider how insights from film studies can inform how we understand games (King and Krzywinska 2006). Yet as these contributors make clear this is a complex game—part sci-fi, part steampunk, part detective noir. This either opens up the possibility of considering the game cinematically as a complex inter-text or perhaps suggests that its very complexity positions it "beyond genre."

The third tradition considers the role of gameplay and the procedures that are built into a game. How does it play? What options are coded into and out of the game? How does the design of the game open up (and close off) spaces to explore the nature of power beyond the game? Given that power is integral to the focus of so many of the chapters—and that consideration of power is so central to the study of International Relations and world politics—there is incredibly rich potential to use the exploration of the procedural choices which the game allows and the meaning that comes from them as an analytical tool to reflect more broadly on world politics. As Gürses (58) makes clear

> the ethos of *Disco Elysium* ... always invites the player to experiment in the way they interact with the game-world. Accordingly, [it opens up at the possibility to explore parallels between] ... *Disco Elysium*'s intricate role in the relationship between everyday life and video games, informing one another in terms of how we negotiate with and conform to a capitalistic reality.

In his work on the aesthetic subject, Michael Shapiro (2009, 2013) brings sharp focus to the value of looking at the characters who are at the center of a fictional text. His approach is to look at how core characters navigate and traverse the environment in which their story is set and through that explore the structures that enable and deny them movement. As Shapiro (2013) argues, fictional characters' "movements and dispositions are less significant in terms of what is revealed about their inner lives (i.e., their personal motivations for action) than *what they tell us about the world to which they belong*" (11, emphasis added)—not least where their "movements and actions (both purposive and non-purposive) map and often alter experiential, politically relevant terrains" (xiv).

Fundamental to the insights gained from an examination of the aesthetic subject is what we can learn about the way in which power is exercised. Given that so many characters in fictional texts are members of marginalized groups, this approach can be particularly valuable in exploring the lived experiences of those who are frequently ignored within IR's focus on states, elites and high politics (see also Grayson 2017).

Given their focus on movement and on rules that bind that movement, video games such as *Disco Elysium* offer exceptional opportunities to explore aesthetic subjects. Furthermore, given the active desire of this particular game to provide a complex world in which the player is engaging in interactions with other characters through dialogue and negotiating asymmetrical power relations through movement, it is ripe with opportunities to actively consider how the characters' movement and actions can be considered in relation to power, enabling questions as to who, what or why enables or restricts the character(s)' movements and what this tells us about the world beyond the game. *Disco Elysium* is also centered on an intertextual appropriation of the noir detective genre which, as Macleod (2014) makes clear, offers up aesthetic subjects par excellence. Given their role as criminal investigators, protagonists in this genre are frequently confronted with power being mobilized in corrupt or illicit ways which they must overthrow as a by-product of their investigation.

Therefore, a core question for an IR approach to *Disco Elysium* is whether or not it profoundly shapes/changes the existing frameworks found within game studies that explore narratives, visuals and cinematic qualities and/or gameplay. The position within this book—which I share—is that there is no reason why they should; instead we can simply fold IR theory through and/or within an approach that looks at narratives, cinematic properties or gameplay. Such thinking is reflexive of the history of both film and literary studies, both of which embed theoretical thinking

within the process of reading artefacts (such as feminist or postcolonial scholarship on novels and films) and both of which have deep-seated traditions of applying non-Western perspectives to both literature and film.

Overall, the contributors to this collection are strongly focused on engaging with the narratives within *Disco Elysium*, albeit in ways heavily contingent on the gameplay options that were presented to them and which they unlocked through their interaction with the game. What the contributors offer analysis on was therefore largely driven by their own narrative experience—which is highly contingent, yet integral to the analysis that is offered. The chapters—theoretically informed as they are—provide a variety of examples of scholar-academics who are offering accounts of their own narrative of the game which is informed by theory.

Taken together, the varied play experiences of the contributors provide an excellent set of insights into the ways that the game can be used (through those varied experiences) to open up a number of overlapping and competing insights into the way that power, capitalism, subjectivity and security (to name but four) are modeled in the game, and through that to demonstrate the ways that the game can offer insight into how these concepts unfold and can be problematized within global politics.

### *Beyond Anglo-American IR? Toward a post-colonial Estonian IR?*

A core aim of the book is to engage with the game and, through doing so, to contribute to the ongoing debate as to the importance of problematizing Anglo-American-centric thinking in relation to IR—as well as to open up spaces for a non-Western take on IR (Introduction, 9). This is a laudable and timely aim to be sure: in advocating for such a move, the book joins multiple other calls to think anew about IR's Western base and the value which non-Anglo-American popular culture can have to provoke such moves (e.g., Ling 2014; Shilliam 2010).

The game is seen by the authors as valuable to such thinking given that it is based on providing an allegorical representation of Estonia and Estonia's position in the world (Introduction, 10). This is a view articulated explicitly in the chapter by Rantanen, who reads the game as a critical allegory of Estonia's position as a post-Soviet Eastern European state, struggling to adjust to and benefit from the asymmetrical power relations that it has been subjected to through EU membership. Seen this way, the game leverages unique post-Soviet Eastern European perspective that advances the possibilities for a critique of Anglo-American IR. Indeed, the potential to use the game in this way is genuinely exciting. Reflecting Weber (2021) above it suggests the game could be a valuable tool to invoke and provoke thinking. Given that it is made by an Estonian development team (ZA/UM) and has been openly acknowledged by the developers as seeking to embed Estonian narratives within its fabric, there is clearly important potential for precisely this (ERR 2020; Ozimek 2021; Eklund et al. 2024).

Yet in different ways, multiple authors in the volume also suggest that *Disco Elysium*—and the insight that it offers—opens up ways of thinking that are intrinsically theoretical and even allow for the potential articulation of what we

might call a "not-quite-Estonian" perspective on world politics. This is important given that much of the literature cited within the book is "Western," a fact that arguably could leave its contributors open to the critique that they have failed to offer a sufficiently non-Anglo-American take on IR. For the authors, however, to issue such a claim would be to miss the point. As Castro and Kiersey note in the Introduction, what makes *Disco Elysium*'s Estonia useful is that it helps IR scholars pause and reflect on the stakes of their assumptions about "real world" binaries such as East and West, and Global North and Global South in the first place. In a manner that echoes the arguments of Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000), the argument here is that capitalist globalization has colonized not only countries but imaginations, irrevocably altering the intellectual and philosophical infrastructures of the whole world. Thus, as applied in Kolehmainen's chapter for example, we see a discussion of the "black-coded" fascist and racial supremacist Measurehead. Or, similarly, in Rossdale's chapter, where the game's agnosticism on the question of policing is juxtaposed to the game's critique of the quest for self-mastery in modern Western culture, showing how this quest dominates the identities even of subaltern positions. With these sorts of examples, the game helps us reflect on IR's tendency both to reify the colonizer/colonized binary as one of an essentially white European and non-white nature and to engage in nostalgia for an essentialized subaltern purity. In this light, the contributions to this volume leverage one of the great strengths of speculative fiction, which is, precisely, that by refusing to "be real" it can help shake us in our assumptions, including not least the assumption of a neat "West" and "Rest." Or even the assumption that there can be an essentialized "Estonian" or "post-Soviet" take on IR at all!

## Future research

Finally, while the richness offered by this volume is clear, a return to the frameworks of popular culture and world politics set out earlier demonstrates that there remain a number of outstanding and highly valuable possibilities for future research. I offer these suggestions not in the spirit of criticism but rather to show the exciting possibilities that the book prompts for future research. Here I set out three (non-exhaustive) illustrations to demonstrate the rich potential that remains: audience research, consumption patterns and associated national values, and the cultural standing of *Disco Elysium*.

### *Audiences*

An important theme that the book begins to engage with is that of audiences. As the editors (Introduction, 7) point out, IR scholars, particularly those who engage with popular culture, have hitherto offered relatively limited engagements with audiences, instead placing most of their emphasis on formal readings of artefacts.

Gabriel's chapter offers a valuable exploration of the way that players of *Disco Elysium* debate and discuss it on the social media platform Reddit. The chapter demonstrates that the debate held on these discussion boards is of importance to IR

scholarship in understanding how audiences (here players) make sense of the game's themes, particularly pertaining to identity and political order. Gabriel shows that the discussion boards engender high-quality discussion, which has important implications for our understanding of audiences but also demonstrates the value of the analysis of social media forums more generally. As Gabriel argues, *Disco Elysium* functions as a wellspring for primarily politically oriented discussion, carried out by a community that skews politically left-leaning and embraces marginal identities. The contribution(s) thus provide an important rejoinder to earlier work such as that by Klaus Dodds (2006) on discussion among fans of James Bond films on IMDB which in contrast found little evidence of "political talk."

Gabriel's discussion of audiences thus raises important insights and offers a framework for others to replicate the methods used. The contribution as it stands, however, raises important implications for discussion of more general audiences. What is covered herein is centered on highly dedicated fan communities (Jenkins 2006). But what of those that are not sufficiently invested in the game to debate it within forums online? What meanings do they take from the game? Future research that actively seeks to connect with general players, for example, through focus groups or player interviews, could be a really interesting adjunct to the insights offered here in order to explore whether different themes are raised, and how more general audiences negotiate, discuss and perhaps contest the meanings that they place/read into the game (for a parallel example see DeVane and Squire 2008). Do Estonian audiences, for example, see the game in different ways than, for example, American, British or other players in the Baltic states? And do audiences reach different or similar interpretations in relation to *Disco Elysium* to those that the authors emphasize?

Future research could also actively explore how the controversy that has emerged in relation to the game's development has shaped how players/users now feel about it. As I set out at the start of this afterword, the game is clearly one that (initially at least) was greeted with very real affection. There is strong emotional connection with *Disco Elysium* for many players, based at least in part on its promotion and acclaim as a game which was seen as offering a critical take on capitalist exploitation. A core question, therefore, could be whether or not players have shifted their view away from feeling deeply invested in the game toward agnosticism, apathy or outright hostility.

### *Consumption patterns*

Another possible strand of research could focus on the implications from consumption patterns, exploring where *Disco Elysium* is played (and not played) and how its messages have resonated in national discussion. Research on popular culture, world politics and consumption is an emerging, yet underdeveloped, field with importance in informing knowledge on the linkage between games and national values. Earlier work, for example, by Towns and Rumelili (2006) has explored the insights for understanding of national values gained through exploring the similarities and contrasts between the reception of the Harry Potter books in

Sweden and Turkey, two countries where the books found huge commercial success. Towns and Rumelili show that reviews of the Harry Potter books in the national media and elsewhere provoked important debate in relation to Turkish and Swedish national identity and explore how Harry Potter's representation of social and economic stratification and gender fits within Swedish and Turkish sensibilities.

In the case of *Disco Elysium*, the game was initially banned in Australia by the Australian Classification Board in March 2021 on the basis that it "depict[s], express[es] or otherwise deal[s] with matters of sex, drug misuse or addiction, crime, cruelty, violence or revolting or abhorrent phenomena" in a way that offended "against the standards of morality, decency and propriety generally accepted by reasonable adults." It ruled the game should not be classified (*The Guardian*, 24 March 2021). While the ban was overturned on appeal in May 2021, the contrasting case in Australia and elsewhere of how the game was viewed provides interesting opportunities to explore national values either as imagined by regulators (comparing those that banned and did not ban the game) or of players (i.e., how did Australian players and non-players feel about the game's initial banning and what strategies—if any—did they implement to evade the ban?)

## *The cultural standing of* Disco Elysium

*Disco Elysium* was a game launched to enormous critical and commercial acclaim. It thus opens up the possibility for research in relation to the status and standing that video game developers have as artistic practitioners and whether this enables them to speak independently of their work as political subjects. In her work on graphic novels, Lene Hansen (2017) makes it clear that one core attribute of the francophone graphic novel tradition is the high esteem that many of the leading exponents of the form hold within society more generally. Graphic novels which explore war and conflict, for example, are not just valued for their insights as artefacts, but their makers are seen as important political orators free to speak independently of their work. In comparison, video games and their creators have historically not enjoyed the same standing as such graphic novel authors, instead being seen as producers of low art more akin to the standing of comic book artists and authors in the United States. The status of video game producers, even of those who are producing a near-universally acclaimed game such as *Disco Elysium*, is thus a potentially important factor in explaining how games like as this can speak truth to power in the absence of voices speaking independently of their art. Initially at least, *Disco Elysium* was unusual in that the developers spoke eloquently and articulately about the political and critical intent of the game. The extent to which this reflects the growth of developers as legitimate political operators is worthy of further consideration.

The controversy around *Disco Elysium* (which I touched on at the start of this chapter) also teases out the potential for important research into the political economy of this game and of the games industry more generally. In particular, the controversy has raised important issues in relation to how the game was made and whether or not developers were subjected to unreasonable and excessive working hours, the extent to which they had any form of labor protection, and how

intellectual property rights are negotiated within independent and larger-scale developers (there remains ongoing contestation over who designed core elements of the game and who has the "right" to make a mooted sequel). The present research on the games industry has emphasized the vulnerabilities of game workers to exploitation and overwork, resulting in growing calls for unionization. Questions such as these—among many more—are themes that IR scholars could actively contribute to, so building on the extremely valuable and instructive foundations laid by the book as a whole. Overall, for game studies and IR alike to continue to progress, both need to treat one another more seriously. This book does a very good job of legitimating that call and providing a blueprint for how to move forward. The challenge for IR scholars is to pick up a keyboard/controller and play—not just for the intrinsic pleasure of doing so, but in order to continue to sharpen our understanding of the world around us. Yet this is not just a challenge for IR; the challenge is also for game studies scholars to embrace and engage with IR. Our understanding not only of games but also of the world that games continue to mold in profound ways would be richer for it.

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